

The Limits of Empire: Reevaluating Charles Metcalfe's Mission to Lahore, August 1808-May 1809

In 1808 British-Indian diplomacy countered a potential overland threat from France through Persia by sending out three formal missions to Persia, the Kingdom of Caubul, and the Sikh court in Lahore. The missions represented early and tentative British imperial efforts to further spread a globalizing political and economic influence into western Asia. The missions variously failed in their immediate agendas to create substantive alliances specifically designed to oppose any French initiated invasion east of the Indus River. Yet these missions foreshadowed later generations of well-studied intervention. They also left political, literary, and historical legacies that remained influential into the twenty-first century.

Although a footnote in a conference dedicated to the consideration of Elphinstone and his *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* (1815), the embassy of Charles Metcalfe, Assistant Resident in Delhi, to the court of Ranjit Singh, arguably left the most enduring political result of these early diplomatic forays. This paper argues that, contrary to the received colonial narrative of a successful effort by Metcalfe that resulted in the Treaty of Amity and Concord, 25 April 1809, the fullest beneficiary of this period of diplomatic uncertainty in British India, aside from Charles Metcalfe and his career, may well have been Ranjit Singh. By 1808, Ranjit Singh had observed the East India Company use of superior organizational and military methods to defeat and subordinate Maratha competitors and he had few illusions that aggressive English policies of subsidiary alliances and territorial conquest were only limited to a particular governor-general in Calcutta or would end with the 1803 occupation of Delhi or on the banks of the Jumna River. Unlike the mission of Malcolm in Persia, that ended quickly, or the visit of Elphinstone to Peshawar that lasted weeks, Ranjit Singh spent eight months in circuitous negotiations with Charles Metcalfe. Nominally, Metcalfe's triumph was to limit Ranjit Singh's territorial ambitions to the west of the Sutlej River. In fact, one might argue that Ranjit Singh's triumph was to use aggressive actions between the Sutlej and Jumna in the period of extended negotiations with Metcalfe to gain formal recognition that Ranjit Singh would be allowed to rule unhindered west of the Sutlej, including unhindered by the East India Company. The fact that this imperial boundary would remain intact for thirty more years suggests that Ranjit Singh may have gained the most from the diplomacy of that year.

This research contributes to the history of the pre-colonial and colonial history of the Punjab and of Pakistan as colonial narratives, ideologies, and discourses continue to be reevaluated in post-colonial studies.