

Lahore
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The crazy Italian of Lahore

WHEN Lahore adopts a man, the relationship is unique. One cannot say the attachment is magnetic, but it certainly defies logical explanation. One such man was an Italian, who rose to the post of governor of Lahore. He was, initially, made Qazi of the city, and then governor. He was all-powerful ... and he was feared like few have ever been.

Jean Baptiste Ventura was born in Italy some time in the very late 17th century. As a very young man he joined the Italian contingent that was raised to fight with the forces of Napoleon in Russia in 1812, and remained with the French forces as an outstanding officer. His final European battle was at Waterloo, after which he just walked away from the disarray. He was young and he was shattered, and as he was to record later, he felt sorry that everyone did not fight till death. Crazy is the only word any sane military analyst would use for a man like him.

But Ventura had other ideas, and when he walked away, he walked away. Historians tell us that he was "very martial to look at and a man with a fiercely independent streak", a sort of no-nonsense person who did the job given, irrespective of the methods employed. Yet he was a man of undoubted class. He returned to Italy, rested a while and then bade farewell to his family, gathered all the gold he could and set off for the "Orient". His long travels finally landed him in Lahore, which in those days after the fall of Napoleon was seen as the main centre of power that

opposed imperial Britain. He would fight them there. The tales about Maharajah Ranjit Singh were known far and wide, and the Punjabi 'Misl' were revered as the finest army in Asia, at least Lord Roberts of India thought so.

In Lahore, the Maharajah made him wait for almost a year. He was sizing up this impressive man. Then Ranjit Singh made up his mind. Ventura entered the service of the Lahore Darbar in 1822. He was given command of a Sikh infantry regiment, and this regiment he trained himself like "only tyrants do". Very soon, it was known as the most fearless regiment of the Punjab army, and the soldiers admired this no-nonsense man who led from the front. They liked him for his 'unpredictable' ways. He seldom punished offenders, but when he did it seemed unusually "excessive". But the Maharajah allowed him the freedom he needed, for the test would come in battle, and that test came in 1823 at the Battle of Nowshera. The Ventura Regiment put the Pathans to not only flight, but so ruthless was his drive and so merciless his methods, that many felt that battle actually opened up the road to Kabul, at least in the minds of the Pathans.

For this reason, Maharaja Ranjit Singh liked him and used him to good effect, though his actions often shocked and alarmed the maharajah every now and then. The maharajah always defended him with the remark: "Garam khoon, damagh puttha, bandah mard hai" — he is hot blooded, his

mind odd, but he is a real man.

Maharajah Ranjit Singh was convinced that this Italian, who it seems, had a slight French mannerism, was a born leader. In 1825, he was made head of two major campaigns, and this led to a major revolt among the Sikh sardars who thought that they had fought for years to earn that place, which an "outsider" had claimed. But Ranjit Singh insisted, and managed to get his way. It must be said that Gen Ventura stayed loyal to the maharajah as long as he lived. He was given the title of "Wafadar", a title to which he lived up to. The maharajah ordered him to marry a Punjabi woman, but he flatly disagreed and said: I will marry to obey your order, but I will marry a woman I choose, not you". The maharajah loved his answer. Jean Baptiste Ventura married the petite daughter of a Frenchman living in Ludhiana, and kept her in a house built next to the tomb of Anarkali, away from the bustle of the city. That house is today part of the present secretariat complex, built by the French as headquarters for the army of Maharajah Ranjit Singh.

But though he had a beautiful wife, he did never really bother about her. Instead he also kept a harem of his own near Chuna Mandi in a huge haveli which, according to one description, had "40 or 50 beautiful slave girls". It was known among the Lahore Court that they "all loved him and feared him". He was a crazy man by any description of the word. Soon he was made the Qazi of Lahore, and within a few months crime

came to almost zero in the walled city of Lahore. He adopted the unique punishment of hanging thieves by one leg for two days. Odd, you will agree. One rapist he hung by the unmentionable till he died, and he let his body hang for five days till it stank. When the governor protested to the maharajah, he was made governor instead. The people loved the decision.

In that position he immediately set about improving the drainage system, and followed it with an emphasis on gardens and huge and beautiful buildings. The Italian in him was emerging. He can be said to have been a major influence in the way old Lahore, the old walled city, developed. By this time his own people were bothering Ranjit Singh. The maharajah felt the need to quell unrest among the Cheema and Chattha sardars in Wazirabad, Gujranwala and Daska, and so Ventura was sent as the governor of Wazirabad.

Ventura arrived quietly in Wazirabad. The locals laughed at the choice, because he had a fierce reputation of being fearlessly fair and honest. After two weeks of his arrival, he invited all the unruly landlords to a gathering in the main square of the city, and suddenly arrested over 20 known dacoits from among their followers. These he hung immediately by the neck to everyone's amazement and shock, and let their bodies rot in the sun for more than five days.

It was a sort of "shock and awe" tactic that kept the Cheemas and the Chatthas in check for as long as Maharajah Ranjit

Singh was in power. The Lahore Darbar was in turmoil over the incident, and the maharajah was himself very upset. He had expected some action, but not this. Ventura was summoned before the Khalsa sardars to explain his bizarre act.

He told the maharajah: "You belong to Gujranwala. These people only fear force. Anything fine will not cut with them". The maharajah agreed and advised him to keep a softer touch. He smiled, begged leave and returned on horseback the same day to Wazirabad.

When Maharajah Ranjit Singh was nearing death in 1839, he was then posted in Peshawar after Hari Singh Nalwa had died. He rushed back and was one of the main mourners at his funeral, where he finally cried, with the famous comment: "It will be quite some time before another like him will rise".

Two years after the death of Ranjit Singh, Ventura could clearly see the end of the Sikh empire coming. He sold his house in Lahore in 1841, took his daughter, his money from the sale of his house, his gold and other possessions. He left behind his French wife and his harem. "Impediments" he called them.

He went to France to live on his estate. "It's time to rest", he said, breathing his last on the April 3, 1858. If ever a man had made Lahore his home, it was Gen Jean Baptiste Ventura — the man who loved the work he did, but whose methods were definitely questionable. That is why he is known as the 'crazy Italian of Lahore' ... for when he walked away, he just walked away. —MAJID SHEIKH