

## Ranjit Singh and His Times

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### Introduction

For a discerning historian of modern Indian history, the story of Maharaja Ranjit Singh has ever remained a fascinating field of study. He has been rated as one of the most outstanding rulers of his times in the whole of Asia. The foreigners and the officials of the British East India Company, whenever they found an opportunity to visit Punjab they felt proud in having an audience with Ranjit Singh. Alexander Burnes, the representative of the King of England was deeply influenced after having a meeting with the ruler of Punjab.

“I quitted the presence of a native of Asia with such impressions as I left this man: without education, and without a guide, he conducts all the affairs of his kingdom with surprising energy and vigour and yet he wields his power with a moderation quite unprecedented in an eastern Prince.” (1)

In the opinion of some of the Western scholars, Ranjit Singh was the rightful claimant of the throne of Delhi after the decline of the Mughals if the British power had not emerged in India and established themselves as the indirect rulers of India.

“If it had not been restrained by the gigantic power of the East India Company, Ranjit would long ago have been seated on the throne of Delhi, a great Moghul in all but his religion.” (2)

Historians are of the opinion that it was only the Treaty of Amritsar signed between British and Ranjit Singh in 1809 which checked the ambitions of Ranjit Singh due to which the Princely States of Punjab had joined hands with the British and thus the Maharaja had to turn his interests in some other direction.

“He was the most extraordinary man of the age between Constantinople and Peking and with the help of his forces and his lofty spirit of ambition he would have formed another Empire in Hindustan, had there been no Treaty of Amritsar.”(3)

The European adventurers, travelers and explorers who visited the Sikh kingdom never failed to find in Ranjit Singh the likeness of Napoleon Bonaparte,

the French Emperor. Both were endowed by nature with extraordinary qualities and ambition for power and were great generals of armies. Napoleon's dream for a vast empire knew no bounds whereas Ranjit Singh's policy of expansion remained within limits of the possible. It is further interesting to note that both were products of great movements that brought forth the ideals of "liberty and equality", offered tough resistance to oppressive monarchies and generated such powerful forces which affected the course of history. Napoleon crowned himself as the Emperor of France thus upsetting the ideals set forth by progenitors of French Revolution.

On the other hand, Ranjit Singh wisely chosen to content himself by claiming to be no more than the general of the Khalsa commonwealth. He was in some sense an elected chief like Augustus Ceaser who never pushed his pretensions too far. He knew full well that democratic nature of the Sikh institutions as established by the great Sikh Gurus and the powerful sentiments of the Sikh people would resist all attempts at dictation. Therefore he chose to unify Punjab and consolidate his position by following such policies that remained responsive to the urges of the people. Such a policy enabled him to weld the entire north western region from Sutlej to Khaiber and Ladakh to Sind into a kingdom, the geo-political situation of which made it a state in a special sense. The fact that Ranjit Singh was able to seal the Khyber pass, the traditional route of the invaders who led campaigns against India and assertion of his position as a sovereign ruler vis-a-vis the British paramount power in India, were such events that marked the onset of a new era in the history of North Western region of the Indian sub continent.

When Ranjit Singh took over the affairs of Punjab, there was no administrative organization worth the name. The edifice of the Mughal administration had crumbled fully under the weight of Afghan invasions and the Sikh resistance to authority. He restored law and order, abolished anarchy and political instability and also brought the strife torn misls under his effective control.

"He had started his career as an ordinary chieftain and had built up in the face of mighty challenges from the British, Gurkhas and Afghan powers, a vast kingdom which had co-terminous frontiers with Tibet, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Sind and British India....He had also restored law and order, where none had existed for a whole century after Aurangzeb's death. The Punjab, which was no better than a foot -mat of the Afghan invaders of India, had been turned into a land of peace and prosperity. A well knit and powerful state had taken the place of the strife torn and atomized polity of the Sikh misaldars." (4)

Further by the time of the emergence of Ranjit Singh, the leaders of the

Sikhs had already died or became old. With some Ranjit Singh entered into matrimonial relations and thus cemented his position because the existing conditions suited him politically and diplomatically.

“All the venerated Sikh chiefs who had fought the wars of freedom before him either singly or together were dead – Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, once the king of the whole Sikh people, and the veteran Bhangi Chiefs – Jhanda Singh and Ganda Singh among them. Jassa Singh Ramgharia was too advanced in years and Jai Singh Kanhaiya, besides being far from his old self, had now entered into a matrimonial alliance with Ranjit Singh.” (5)

In the process of his empire building, Ranjit Singh was never in favor of outright annexations. The Chiefs who accepted his power were required to pay a tribute and were left free to manage their areas by their own. Further, these Chiefs were provided with jagirs and their forces were made part of the armies of Lahore Kingdom.

“Whereas he was determined to push forward his boundaries and was never prepared to make any compromise on that all important issue, he took every possible care to avoid outright annexation, as far as possible. The subjugated Chiefs were only required to pay a certain tribute to him. They were left free in the enjoyment of their internal freedom and had the Maharaja’s assurance that so long as they paid the tribute regularly and did not have relations with any outside power against the wishes of the suzerain, no interference would be made with the exercise of their authority.” (6)

In Ranjit Singh’s scheme of a strong and united Punjab, the existence of independent chieftains of the region could not be accepted so it was the demand of the day that they must be brought under the supreme power of the Lahore Kingdom. The empire of Ranjit Singh extended from the Himalayas in the north-east to the deserts lying in Sind in south western part of the country, from river Satluj in the north –east to beyond the river Indus in the south-west. The Indian scholars praised Ranjit Singh for his achievements in this regard:

“The ruler of the Sikhs was the first monarch after Anangpal who not only checked the recurring stream of invaders which during eight hundred years had been pouring into the Punjab from the north western frontier but also subdued the inhabitants of the area. Thus he brought the scattered people of the Punjab under a uniform and consistent system of government and thereby evolved a young and vigorous nation.” (7)

Thus Ranjit Singh by his continuous efforts, policies, tact and diplomacy united the various groups of the Sikhs into a strong state. He successfully created a kingdom from the remains of confusion and political uncertainty in Punjab. His position has beautifully compared with Frederick the Great of Germany.

“The position of Ranjit Singh among the Sikhs may be paralleled with that of Frederick the Great, of Germany, who rose to power not so much as the king of Prussia as the one man to whom all the Germans could look as likely to raise that medley of principalities and electorates into a nation.” (8)

Ranjit Singh thus proved himself successful in setting up the state of Punjab. He left no stone unturned to consolidate his position and took all advantages of the circumstances prevailing at that time. His state had the character of a Khalsa state. All his affairs during correspondence with the English Company and the other foreign powers were conducted under the title Sarkar-i-Khalsa. No doubt, Ranjit Singh was a product of the Sikh movement. His state and administration was greatly influenced by Sikhism. Maharaja understood the great utility of Sikhism in constructing his empire. Cunningham has rightly commented upon this aspect of the character of the Maharaja. He never acted like a despot or tyrant :

“Ranjit Singh never arrogated to himself the title of or the powers of despot or tyrant. He was assiduous in his devotions, he honored men of reputed sanctity and enabled them to practice an enlarged charity; he attributed every success to the favor of the God, and he styled himself and the people collectively called the Khalsa or commonwealth of Gobind. ....or in restraining the excesses of the fanatical Akalis or in beating an army, his own name and his own motives were kept carefully concealed and everything was done for the sake of the Guru, for the advantage of the Khalsa, and in the name of the Lord.” (9)

Ranjit Singh gave importance to the liberal and secular ideas and dedicated his successes and powers in the name of the Sikh Gurus.

“Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s liberalism and secularism flowed out of the pluralistic Sikh tradition itself. That is why Ranjit Singh, on the occasion of his coronation as the Maharaja of Lahore on 12th April 1801, issued the Nanakshahi coin with the inscription that attributed the bestowal of victory and power to the grace of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh-“ Dagh-o-Tegh-o-Fateh-Nusrat bedrang/Yaft az Nanak Guru Gobind Singh.” (10)

It was in the field of civil and military administration one can easily witness the superb practical wisdom and farsightedness of the Maharaja. He set up a kind of personal sway over the country and the people. He paid serious attention to the smallest details of the administration whether it was revenue, judiciary and army etc.

“Ranjit Singh realized the importance of institutionalization and devoted close and minute attention to all aspects of his administration. He set up an elaborate secretariat at the centre and appointed competent diwans to supervise its working.....the revenue and judicial systems also received close and unrest

attention from Ranjit Singh....the assessment was based on the crop grown and cultivators had to pay the revenue in kind or cash....Full allowance was made for the damages from both natural and unnatural causes...In the countryside the judicial work was handled by the people's courts, village panchayats according to the established customs of their communities...Justice was cheap. Capital punishment was a rare phenomenon." (11)

English historian Malcolm praised the judicial system of the Sikhs working in the times of Ranjit Singh and the interest taken in its proceedings by the Maharaja himself.

" he spoke of the superiority of the system of Sikh justice over the bothersome system of the English government, which was tedious, vexatious and expensive and advantageous only to the clever rogues." (12)

Ranjit Singh issued instructions to his revenue officials particularly for not to resort to oppression and exploitation at the time of the collection of revenue from the cultivators. His policy in this respect has been guided by the consideration of the increase of the revenues. He gave prime importance to the welfare of the people.

" The Maharaja issued an ishtiharnama to most of his provincial farmers and jagirdars.....asking them to keep in view the solicitude and prosperity of the subjects in all administrative matters, especially in collection of revenue and to avoid every kind of oppression of the cultivators." (13)

Ranjit Singh realized that apart from modernization of arms, training and formation of troops was also essential to check the powerful rivals by whom his empire surrounded. He recruited European officers who were demobilized after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. In the erstwhile Sikh combatant formations of Sikh Misls, the soldiers had the liberty to change their misls and the leaders but Ranjit Singh did away with this practice. He tried to maintain a delicate balance between the traditional fighting forces and the new formations.

" He was not a blind imitator of the west, exactly as he was not an orthodox follower of the East. His approach was selective and not mechanical." (14)

Ranjit Singh was very fond of guns and for that purpose he set up a strong park of artillery. He had superb knowledge of guns and their functioning. During his invasions, he was always in frantic search of the guns in the arsenals of his rivals.

" The Raja's attachment to his guns and opinion of their weight are both so great that he would never miss an opportunity of obtaining a gun. If he learnt that there is a gun in any fort, he cannot resist until he has taken the fort to get at the gun....he immediately dismounts the gun from the wall and drags it after him as an addition to his field train." (15)

Even during the later years of Maharaja's reign, the British officers who had seen the artillery stock of the Lahore Kingdom praised the efforts of Ranjit Singh.

"Earlier in 1831 also, Alexander Burnes and Captain Wade who had seen the discharge of the Maharaja's topkhana and remarked that such a huge topkhana did not exist at any other place, stating that the Maharaja must have taken huge pains in his effort and endeavor to collect it." (16)

Fauja Singh is of the opinion that the military system of Ranjit Singh and his successors may be termed as the Franco-British system in the Indian setting. After he was convinced of the superiority of European mode of warfare, Ranjit Singh applied himself with unswerving zeal to organize his army on European model. He introduced the European system of training and similar weapons and the same type of tactics." (17)

The historians keenly observed the administration and political stability in Lahore Kingdom under Ranjit Singh and praised the Maharaja for his bravery and tactics.

"Maharaja had an abundant fund of administrative ability and bravery, the two qualities rarely to be found in one and the same man. Sometimes he took in hand hazardous plans but executed them efficiently....He possessed a sharp and enlightened intellect and could conduct the most intricate affairs of the state with dexterity." (18)

Another historian, Lepel Griffin expressed his views in glowing terms about Ranjit Singh and his greatness.

"He was a born ruler with the natural genius of command. Men obeyed him by instinct and because they had no power to disobey. The control which he exercised even in the closing years of his life over the whole Sikh people.... was the measure of his greatness." (19)

He further says," He yet ruled the country which his military genius had conquered with a vigour of will and ability which placed him in the front rank of the statesmen of the country. (20)

Ranjit Singh died on June 27, 1839 after a reign of 40 years. On the eve of his death the Lahore Kingdom was facing difficult situations. There was a grave peril from outside and the state was suffering from major weaknesses internally. But till date the people of Punjab finds it hard to believe that the system created by the Maharaja was having some defects and the Empire had to decline due to the mal-intentions of the British and Dogras.

"The people of Punjab cherished his memory and legend still lives amidst them. They have refused to believe that the decline of Sikh Kingdom was

inherent in the system of governance that Ranjit Singh had created. ....They remain ever inclined to believe that the perfidy of the British and the infidelity of the Dogras coupled with avaricious conduct of his collaterals, Sandhanwallias, led to the ignominious liquidation of the kingdom despite the chivalry of the Khalsa sepoys from whom the British were unable to get even a formal surrender." .....For all of those inhabiting Punjab, Ranjit Singh remains a symbol of their glory as well as pride. In fact, Ranjit Singh does not belong to a specific era, he belongs to total spectrum of modern Indian history." (21)

### *Notes and References*

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