

# *Maharaja Ranjit Singh*



**LOK SABHA SECRETARIAT  
NEW DELHI  
AUGUST 2003**

# MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH

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# PREFACE

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was one of the outstanding figures in Indian history. Popularly known as the Lion of Punjab, *Sher-e-Punjab*, centuries after his death, he continues to live in the hearts of the people as a source of inspiration and pride for generations of Indians. A warrior *par excellence*, he was also a valiant leader, an astute diplomat, an able administrator and above all a benevolent king. At a time when Punjab was undergoing a period of turmoil, he brought the scattered people of Punjab under a uniform and structured system of government by the sheer force of his personality. With his military prowess and fighting skills, he carved out a mighty kingdom and rested it on firm grounds. He raised the oppressed on their feet and breathed self-confidence into them. But more than his warrior instinct and administrative acumen, it is the secular dimension of his personality which made him a monarch with a difference.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a secular sovereign who looked upon all his subjects as one, irrespective of their religion and creed. He created a strong, secular and well-protected State and under his able administration, Punjab saw decades of happiness and prosperity. His benevolence and valour, and care and concern for his people, made him a legend in his own time.

A grateful nation honours the memory of Maharaja Ranjit Singh on 21 August 2003 when the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee unveils Maharaja Ranjit Singh's statue in the Parliament House Complex. We are grateful to the Hon'ble Speaker, Lok Sabha, Shri Manohar Joshi, for his keen interest and valuable guidance in organising the function.

The statue of the Maharaja, sculpted by the eminent sculptor Padmashree Ram V. Sutar, is 18 feet high and is made of bronze. We are grateful to the Maharaja Ranjit Singh Trust, Haus Khas Enclave, New Delhi for donating the statue.



On this occasion, an exhibition on the life and times of the Maharaja is also being organised by the Parliamentary Museum and Archives of the Lok Sabha Secretariat.

The Lok Sabha Secretariat is bringing out this publication which is a humble tribute to the memory of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, one of the legendary figures in the nation's history. We hope it will be found useful and informative by all.

**NEW DELHI,**  
8 August, 2003

**G.C. MALHOTRA,**  
Secretary-General,  
Lok Sabha.

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# MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH

- A Profile -

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Maharaja Ranjit Singh was one of the most outstanding rulers of Punjab as also in Indian history. With his exceptional qualities of military leadership, diplomacy and administrative skills, he carved out a mighty kingdom by uniting Punjab from the ruins of petty principalities and different communities at war among themselves. Heir to one of the many petty chiefdoms, he rose to be the ruler of a powerful State extending from the Khyber Pass to the Sutlej. He was proclaimed as the Maharaja in 1801. He was a liberal, merciful, judicious, compassionate and popular ruler, who succeeded in establishing a kingdom in Punjab, without any distinction of religion, caste, colour and creed.

## **Early Life**

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was born at Gujranwala on 13 November 1780<sup>1</sup> and was initially named Budh Singh. He was brought up in a tradition of valour; all his ancestors were renowned warriors. His father Maha Singh, his grandfather Charhat Singh and his great grandfather had all been reputed soldiers. His father was a Chieftain who was in full control of his estate. In fact, at the time of Ranjit Singh's birth, Maha Singh was away on a military campaign. He wanted his son to be a conqueror and hence he called him Ranjit Singh, the victor of battles. Though young Ranjit Singh had no formal education, he was proficient in Punjabi and Persian.

In his childhood, Ranjit Singh was taken ill with smallpox, the accursed disease of those days. While his life was saved, he lost one of his eyes. However, there was a glow on his face, a halo around his head and an aura of natural majesty about his whole personality.

Ranjit Singh was initiated into the art of war by his father Maha Singh. Amir Singh, a professional soldier, gave him training in musketry. Ranjit Singh was very fond of swimming, riding and

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<sup>1</sup>There is a difference of opinion about the actual date of birth of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. However, 13 November, 1780 widely accepted as his date of birth.

hunting. At the tender age of ten, he inculcated in himself the qualities of horse riding and shooting which proved to be of great help to him after his father's death. He was endowed with exceptional insights from the very beginning. He wielded the sword with utmost skill. It is said that he killed a lioness when he was only 11 years old. At an early age, he took part in some of the bloodiest battles fought by his father. In his young days, Ranjit Singh was remarkably active, an excellent horseman and well-skilled in everything connected with military feats. He was the foremost in battle and the last in retreat; there is no instance on record of his being ever embarrassed or evincing anything like fear. He was an ideal soldier—strong, active, courageous and enduring.

## **Punjab in the Eighteenth Century**

The rise of Sikh power in Punjab in the 18th century was a unique phenomenon. The forces of religious fervour unleashed by Guru Gobind Singh, the awakener of consciousness, his trials and tribulations, and his tearing spirit, inspired his followers who were to transform with a passionate zeal a purely religious sect into a great military confederacy in the early part of the 18th century.

The end of the Mughal rule saw the rise of Sikhism, with its message of peace, goodwill and brotherhood. It was Guru Gobind Singh who gave shape to the political and territorial ambitions of the Sikhs. Guru Gobind Singh, the last guru, was a contemporary of Aurangzeb. With Aurangzeb's death in 1707 and that of Guru Gobind Singh a year later, the eighteenth century India, more precisely the territory of Punjab, witnessed a period of disturbance and confusion. The Mughal power had started to decline and Nadir Shah's attack a few years later gave it a severe blow. Ahmed Shah Abdali's many inroads and the frequent Persian invasions had destroyed whatever little peace remained.

## **Unification of Punjab**

At this point of time, the land of Punjab was divided into 12 independent states called *misls* each headed by a Sikh baron who was supreme in his own territory. These Sikh *misls* were

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ever ready to attack one another. The religious fervour and idealism that Guru Gobind Singh had instilled in his followers had started to fade away. The Sikh confederacy was witnessing the first signs of disintegration and it needed a man of Ranjit Singh's stature and ambition to redeem the situation. Ranjit Singh succeeded in galvanising these forces of theocratic confederacy into establishing a Sikh Kingdom that was to last for more than half a century.

The Shukarchakia *misl* was the most powerful among the twelve *misls*, which Ranjit Singh managed to get as the legacy from his father. Just at the age of twelve, Ranjit Singh became the head of the Shukarchakia *misl*. As heir apparent of the *misl*, Ranjit Singh had to face political turmoil and personal enemies. After his father Maha Singh's death, Ranjit Singh's mother Raj Kaur acted as a sort of regent. She was assisted by Diwan Lakhpat Rai in the management of state affairs. Also Sardar Dal Singh, the maternal uncle of Maha Singh, acted as a constant guide and adviser to the young prince. However, soon young Ranjit Singh started taking decisions independently. Dal Singh continued to be his political adviser; Rani Sada Kaur, his mother-in-law, proved to be his political mentor who helped him consolidate his position as a Sikh chief.

Ranjit Singh had inherited not only extensive territories, but also political sagacity of a high order. It was the capture of Lahore by him in 1799 which proved to be a landmark in the history of Punjab as well as the life of Ranjit Singh.

## **Conquest of Lahore**

Lahore being a strategically important town, Ranjit Singh made up his mind to conquer it. He held secret consultations with the Hindu and Muslim inhabitants of the town and ordered a night assault on Lahore with his mother-in-law Rani Sada Kaur leading the operation. The people of Lahore had no sympathy for Shah Zaman, the grandson of Ahmedshah Abdali, who had perpetrated untold atrocities on them. The tyranny of the three ruling chiefs had also greatly antagonized them. They, therefore, lent full support to Ranjit Singh, who took the town with the greatest ease. On the successful conclusion of the battle on 7 July 1799, Ranjit Singh issued an order to the officers of his

Army in the following terms: "Lahore is our own territory. Its inhabitants are our kin. They must be treated with respect. Anyone found indulging in plunder or using force against the people or ill-treating them will be severely punished."

Ranjit Singh preferred to call his kingdom the Lahore Durbar rather than a Sikh kingdom. In 1799, some Sardars, among them Jussa Singh Ramgarhia, Gulab Singh of Amritsar, Saheb Singh of Gujrat and Jodh Singh of Wazirabad, made an attempt to wrest Lahore from Ranjit Singh. They were assisted by Nizamuddin of Kasur. They attacked Lahore for four months. But Ranjit Singh deployed his forces with such skill that Lahore escaped any kind of damage and the besieging forces had to withdraw.

Encouraged by this victory, Ranjit Singh marched on to Jammu. On the way, he attacked and occupied the territories of Sialkot and took its ruler, Raja Dal Singh, captive. When Ranjit Singh attacked Atulgarh, the wife of Dal Singh took the field as the head of an army and resisted him. Ranjit Singh lifted the siege of the town and moved towards Dilawargarh. Kesari Singh, the Raja of the place, capitulated and surrendered the fort, at the same time signing a treaty with Ranjit Singh. He gave him a large tract in *jagir*. When finally Ranjit Singh returned to Lahore, he had become the master of large, freshly acquired territories.

## Coronation as the Maharaja

In the year 1801, the Generals of the army, as well as many notables and prominent citizens representing Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs persuaded Ranjit Singh to hold a coronation ceremony at Lahore. It had been a custom among the Sikhs to have a *Sarbat Khalsa* (conclave) every year on the Baisakhi day, to which delegates came from all the *misls* and where *gurmatas* (resolutions) were passed. Hence, the day of *Baisakhi* was chosen as the most auspicious day for the coronation ceremony. The ceremony marked the end of years of disorder and foreign rule and the beginning of a period of peace and plenty.

A Royal Durbar was held inside the fort at Lahore. People came from far and wide to offer their greetings to their new king. Prayers were held in mosques and temples for his long life. At a

the tilak to Ranjit Singh's forehead. On this day, Ranjit Singh's *Sanjha Raj* (Commonwealth) was inaugurated and from this day he was known as the Maharaja. He never intended it as the Sikh rule or his personal rule. In his view, the Lahore Durbar symbolised individual freedom and national unity. Though monarchical in form, it was democratic in content. It was a Commonwealth in the true sense of the term.

## Later Conquests

The following years were used by the Maharaja to strengthen his position in northern India. The alliance that he forged with Fateh Singh Ahluwalia, the heir of Jassa Singh and the Raja of Kapurthala, in 1802 greatly enhanced his prestige and military possibilities. It took many years for him to improve the economy and the finances of the then Punjab. Another aspect which he looked into was the modernization of the military forces. The regular infantry was refurbished and it comprised Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. For this, the Maharaja had to face stiff opposition from the traditional administrative and military hierarchy. Soon he conquered Amritsar (1802), Kasur (1807), Pathankot (1808), Kangra and Jammu (1809) and Attock (by 1813). He also entered into an agreement with Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk, the sovereign of Afghanistan, for a joint operation in Kashmir. In 1813, there was the first great battle between the Afghan Army and Punjabi forces at Chuch, near Attock. The Punjabis under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh won and in 1815-1816, the Maharaja conquered the cis-Indus territories in the north-west bringing his authority in the areas next to the Sutlej river. Then, in a major operation in 1818, the Maharaja completed the conquest of Punjab capturing Multan, the last Afghan bastion. Kashmir was annexed in 1819, Dera Ismail Khan, Mankhera and Derajat in 1821 and Peshawar in 1822.

Thus, by 1822, the Kingdom of Punjab and its province of Kashmir formed a political unit of about thirteen million inhabitants. The integration of so many people of different races and creeds into one political entity was the challenge before the Maharaja, which he completed with utmost perseverance, fighting against heavy odds and difficulties.



## A Military Genius

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a born soldier. He was the greatest military genius that Punjab ever produced and one of the greatest that India has ever seen. During his reign, he led nearly 30 expeditions, leaving only about 12 to his Generals to lead for him. In military prudence and the art of conquest, he has often been compared to Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and the Mughal Emperor Akbar. The Maharaja was also an astute diplomat who held the spirit of an energetic and adventurous military conqueror. Initiated into the art of diplomacy by his mother and mother-in-law, he was wise, farsighted, skillful and convincing as a mediator. He organised efficient armies for securing peace and order in his territory. He had great powers of endurance and was given to long journeys on horseback and paying surprise visits to distant parts of his dominion enabling him to check on his Governors. The Maharaja recognised the worth of military discipline, which meant orderly and tactical movements whether in attack or defence. Therefore, he employed Europeans to train his army which became his third arm. The creation of the *Fauj-I-khas* and the other regular brigades of the Punjab Army, trained on the pattern of European discipline but under his direct command, was the best tool which the Maharaja devised to keep the kingdom strong, unified and peaceful. The modernisation of his army—a must for the smooth development of the State—took an accelerated pace with the enrolment of French and Italian officers who joined him in 1822 and 1827.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, as it is evident from his career of victory, had surprising energy and vigour. In will power, determination and endurance, he was unequalled. He was a unique personality who drew people all around him by his personal bravery and ability. As a warrior, he rose to great heights consolidating his empire into a well-ordered Commonwealth of the people.

## An Astute Administrator

The kingdom of Punjab under Maharaja Ranjit Singh comprised of several *subas* of the Mughal Empire: Lahore, Multan, Kashmir and part of the *suba* of Kabul. The unification and political integration of these different units into one single kingdom or

empire could be done only through a long, patient and systematic effort at establishing peace, favouring economic development and assuring a kind of uniform justice. The creation of the *Fauj-I-Khas* and the other French and regular brigade of the Maharaja gave him the much needed strength for a balanced secular policy allowing each separate unit to live according to its own pace and still participate in the overall economic development of the kingdom of Punjab.

In the organisation of his government, the Maharaja shared extraordinary capacity to grasp the intricacies of administration. The system that emerged under him proved to be efficient, effective, humane and geared towards the welfare of the people. One of the first steps taken by Maharaja Ranjit Singh after his occupation of Lahore was to reorganise the administration of his kingdom in different Ministries and ensure regular revenues to the State. The appointment of trusted and qualified people at the helm of affairs gave the government of Lahore a stability which never degenerated into routine because of the quality of the men in charge and the Maharaja's sagacity.

All through, Maharaja Ranjit Singh endeavoured to streamline his administration. With this in mind, he made several new rules and laws. He set up Panchayats in the villages to settle disputes and to look after local affairs. The Muslim law was used for the Muslims. Qazis and magistrates were appointed who were paid regularly from the State treasury. Nizam-ud-Din became the first Qazi of Lahore, while Muhammad Shahpur and Sa'adullah Chishti were appointed Muftis. They were all granted robes of honour. A charitable hospital was started in the city, which was placed in the charge of Hakim Nur-ud-Din, the younger brother of Maharaja's army commander Faqir Aziz-ud-Din. Medicine was given free in this hospital. A sum of a lakh of rupees was set apart for building a new wall around the city of Lahore. Strong guards were put up at the gates. The whole city was divided into *mohallas*, each *mohalla* having its own Chaudhary. A police force was raised and Iman Bakhsh named the city Kotwal. Maharaja Ranjit Singh also made liberal grants to schools, mosques and temples. Rules for the soldiers' leave and pay were framed. The people were assured of good rule and peaceful life for the first time in many years.

## A Visionary Ruler

During the forty-seven years of his reign, Maharaja Ranjit Singh took systematic care of the peasants who formed 66 per cent of the population, most of them living in the villages. He removed the *Zamindars* of the former Mughal administration in order to give the land to the people who actually cultivated it. By 1839, about 40 per cent of the cultivators owned their land and a systematic policy of resumption of wastelands and rehabilitation of devastated areas was implemented by the Maharaja. He also promoted the restoration of old canals and the digging of new ones. The King himself used to tour the countryside wherever he went and enquired from the peasants about their problems and the conduct and efficiency of their State officers. A sound agrarian policy and a balanced system of revenues formed the backbone of his administration. His concern for the peasantry was deeply personalised for he always regarded himself as one among them and never forgot his roots. A true son of the soil, he took several measures to improve agriculture and production of foodcrops and revived the prosperity of the Punjab peasantry which had remained suppressed for centuries.

The economic and monetary restructuring of Punjab was a task much more difficult than the conquest of so many cities and provinces. The Maharaja followed it patiently, in the wake of the modernisation of British India and the issue of the Company Rupee in 1833-1836. His meeting with Lord William Bentinck, and the Treaty of the Navigation of the Indus in 1832 were partly due to Punjab becoming part of a world economic system with navigation to all the continents.

The prosperity of Punjab during this period came from silver and gold earned from exports as well as from duties on goods transiting through the kingdom. The effect was a growing monetarisation of the economy and some splendid artistic realisations like gilding of the Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar, of the temple of Jawalamukhi and the regilding of the Sonahri Masjid at Lahore.

Apart from a sound government policy which concerned the welfare of his subjects at large, Maharaja Ranjit Singh had a kind, personal approach to the people and he tried to understand

their feelings as much as he could and always respected their beliefs. Thus, in 1819, after the conquest and annexation of Kashmir, the Maharaja's foremost concern was how to put Kashmir back to its former prosperity and glory. To deal with the people in Kashmir whose Muslim population was hostile to Sikh rule required a strong hand; at the same time, dealing with day-to-day life and restoring the shawl trade needed soft governance and an amiable policy which the Maharaja pursued with a lot of patience.

## A Committed Secularist

Unequaled for the daring and originality of his many-sided genius, Maharaja Ranjit Singh gave to Punjab four decades of peace, prosperity and progress. It goes to Maharaja Ranjit Singh's credit that while fulfilling his ambitions, he used bare minimum force. Benefits of his benevolent regime were enjoyed equally by all communities—Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. To unite these three principal communities in a common enterprise and reconciling them to the new political order through liberalism was a unique achievement.

In Maharaja Ranjit Singh's secular State, the spiritual affairs were totally separated from the temporal ones. While he styled himself as a humble representative of the *Khalsa* who was going to rule in the name of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, he ensured that no community or group of people in his kingdom was discriminated against. He was conscious of the fact that a vast majority of his subjects was Muslim by faith who should not be alienated. The important Muslim mosques continued to receive State support during his rule. In fact, the first thing the Maharaja did after taking over Lahore was to visit the local *shahi* mosque as a mark of respect, and also as a gesture of goodwill to the majority community of the town. The Maharaja regarded himself as a common ruler of the Hindus and the Muslims as well as that of the Sikhs. This indeed made him a monarch with a difference.

The Maharaja installed men in office on the basis of merit, irrespective of their creed, caste or colour. With the occupation of Lahore, he placed Muslims in highly respectable posts. Almost all the high offices in the civil administration, in the household and in the Privy Purse were bestowed upon men professing faiths

other than the Maharaja's own. All affairs relating to his personal or ceremonial functions were regulated by non-Sikhs. In selecting his own Ministers as well as other high civil and military officers of government, his choice was never limited to his own community. Fitness was the only one criterion that was set before making any appointments to high positions. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Europeans all alike were appointed to responsible posts in the army. The *Mazhabis*, far from being discriminated against, became a regular component of the Maharaja's army. The character of his State was, therefore, cosmopolitan. In this sense, the Maharaja was a "true Indian" and a committed secularist.

Each and every community of his kingdom was represented in his court by its most eminent members and the administrative and the military structure of the State reflected the multi-ethnic and the multi-cultural diversity of the 14 to 15 million inhabitants of the Punjab. This, in turn, gave a sense of belonging in the people which can be called the true Punjabi ethos or culture—the *Punjabiyyat*. He followed the policy of allowing the fullest freedom to everybody to follow the ways of his own faith. During his rule, there was goodwill between the followers of different faiths and perfect religious amity.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule was characterised by strict observance of norms of public conduct and social ethics. The King always gave primacy to the requirements of public interest to that of personal and family ambitions. The King's office and power were a sacred trust to be used for the well-being of the people. He held steadfastly to the values of justice, freedom, and human dignity. When the victorious *Khalsa* army passed through the streets of Peshawar, he issued strict instructions to his *sardars* to observe restraint in keeping with the Sikh tradition, not to damage any mosque, not to insult any woman and not to destroy any crops. He tried his best to follow the Guru's injunction: "Exercise forbearance in the midst of power, be humble in the midst of honour."

The Maharaja attributed each success to the favour of God. Royal emblems of crown or throne were conspicuous by their absence in his Durbar. When he issued the coins of his empire, he struck them not in his own name, but in the name of the Guru.

The rupee and paise were called *Nanakshahi*. The inscription on them in Persian meant: "Kettle: Symbol of the pot from which the poor were fed, Sword: Symbol of power to protect the meek and the helpless, and victory and unhesitating patronage have been obtained from Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh."

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was no doubt a strong believer and a devout Sikh. However, as Maharaja of Punjab and head of the State with so much ethnic and religious diversity, he showed remarkable interest in preserving the religious and cultural freedom of his subjects. He had a sympathetic approach to the feelings and beliefs of others. One instance which bears testimony to the Maharaja's secular approach and sympathetic attitude to other religions is that once on being asked as to why he spent Rs. 10,000 for a book (the Holy Koran) for which he, being a Sikh, had no use, the Maharaja is believed to have replied: "God intended me to look at all religions with one eye. That is why, he took away the sight from the other. This is a Holy Book. I paid not only the price of the man's labour, but also a tribute to God."

The Maharaja took great care that places of worship of various communities be preserved. He allowed Hindu and Sikh temples to be erected freely throughout his territory. Under him, every religious institution with its teaching units was allowed to function freely disseminating knowledge to the people. Various vernacular education systems developed and flourished during his tenure. Even a small European community, mostly military officers and merchants, lived in his kingdom enjoying complete freedom of religion. In 1834, when General Allard requested for two years' leave to take his four children to France in order to give them a Christian education, Maharaja Ranjit Singh agreed to grant leave with a reply: "Since you mentioned religion, I can say nothing more to oppose your wish. It is a matter of conscience. Every person should be free to follow the religion he chooses and it is his duty to obey its commandments. You can go."

Thus, one of the most notable traits of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's polity was the complete freedom of expression and worship enjoyed by all his subjects. Though he was born and brought up in the Sikh faith and listened to the recitation from Sikh scriptures every day, he did not proclaim Sikhism as the religion of the State. He

also did not make any conscious effort to propagate it. His broad religious outlook was reflected in his according due respect to all religions. There were no outbursts of communal fanaticism, forced conversions, attempts at revenge and language tensions. Repression, bloodshed, execution and tortures were absent. There was no capital punishment. During his forty-year-long reign, not even a single person was sentenced to death. Even cases of bribery and corruption in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's kingdom were very rare. Jawaharlal Nehru, in his *Discovery of India*, has observed:

Ranjit Singh was remarkably humane at a time when India and the world seethed with callousness and inhumanity. He built up a kingdom and a powerful army, and yet he disliked bloodshed. He abolished the death sentence for every crime, however heinous it might be, when in England even petty pilferers had to face death.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was himself a deeply religious man, with a high regard and reverence for all religions. During his royal tours in different parts of the country, he visited holy persons of the other religions along with the Sikh holy places and persons and made offerings to them. He visited Deviji temple at Amritsar, Dera Basti Ram (1834), Punja Sahib(1835), Baba Bishan Singh Bedi of Peshawar (1837), Baba Lachhman Nath of Jogi Math, Bhera (1837), Fakir Alaf Shah of Jammu(1838), Bir Guru Granth Sahib, Kartarpur (1838), the well of Puran Bhagat (1838), the Mausoleum of Data Ganj Bakhsh, Chhaju Bhagat and Rahman Mastan Shah, Lahore (1838), Ram Tirath Tank and Shrine of Mia Mir (1839), etc.

The Maharaja had Muslim wives who had complete freedom to practise their faith. In fact, he encouraged his wives to participate in each other's ceremonials and festivals such as Id, *Dussehra*, *Diwali* and *Baisakhi*. It became a common practice at that time for Hindus and Sikhs to participate in Muslim festivals and for Muslims to take part in Hindu and Sikh festivals. It is for this secular approach that Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Hindu, Muslim and Sikh subjects remembered him in their prayers on important occasions—when he launched a new campaign, when he won a battle, when he had a hair breadth escape, when he was ill and lastly during his illness.

A devout Sikh that he was, the Maharaja visited the Harmandir Sahib quite often and listened to the singing of the holy hymns sitting on the floor of the temple complex. It was because of the Maharaja's devotion that the Harmandir Sahib was covered with gold-plated copper sheets and came to be known as the *Swaran Mandir*, or the Golden Temple. A gold plate at the entrance to the sanctum sanctorum records: "The Guru was kind enough to allow the privilege of service to the Temple to his humble servant Sri Maharaja Singh Sahib Ranjit Singh." Master craftsmen under the Maharaja's instructions redecorated the Golden Temple, and he himself took a keen interest in the details of the work. The stone inlay and floral decorations were executed by expert Muslim artisans and the murals by painters from the famous Kangra School of Art. In terms of its architectural style, the Golden Temple stands out today as unique and magnificent among all the shrines of India.

### **A Great Patron of Art & Literature**

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a connoisseur of arts and endeavoured to promote artistic activities during his reign. What is more significant is his secular approach in matters pertaining to arts, whether it was painting or architecture, music or dance. During his regime, the vitality of the folk artisans was realized. And a new authentic style arose, which was resilient, truthful and pragmatic in its expression of human impulses.

Insofar as the finer arts are concerned, the Maharaja's annexation of Kangra and other Hill States brought its people generally and the Lahore Durbar in particular, into close touch with the glorious heritage of the *Pahari* art. The Maharaja, his household and his courtiers patronized the hill artists without any discrimination and a number of them are said to have entered into the service of the Maharaja or his nobles. The variety of themes covered by the *Pahari* painters, when they came down to serve the Maharaja or his nobility in the Punjab plains, is wide. Among these, the lyrico-mythological themes in miniatures, the religio-mythological themes in wall paintings and the *Janam Sakhis* are the more important.



Maharaja Ranjit Singh's regime is also known for its promotion of the art of portraiture. Commissioning eminent artists to make portraits seemed to be in fashion. The portraits made by the native or foreign artists were both bold and penetrating and eminently succeeded in bringing out the pageantry and colour of the aristocracy of the day. The paintings and portraits, the murals and miniatures, architecture and woodwork, and the medals and coins belonging to the period throw a flood of light on the life and times of the Maharaja. Portrait painting as an art form continued even after the passing away of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Murals or wall paintings were very popular during his regime. Apart from the Gurus and Hindu deities, secular themes also figured prominently in these paintings.

The coins during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign were unadorned and plain. The symbols inscribed on them—some of these being a lion, sword, katar, trident, the banner, and pipal leaf—affirmed his strictly secular approach to the affairs of the State. Simplicity, sincerity and humanity marked the arts developed during Ranjit Singh's regime.

As regards architecture, no communal or parochial considerations were ever allowed to come in the way of the Maharaja carrying forward the old tradition, adapted to suit the local conditions, wherever necessary. It is said that when it was decided to have an impregnable wall built around the holy city of Amritsar, the Maharaja sought the advice of Fakir Aziz-ud-Din. According to Dr. Mulk Raj Anand: "A Muslim craftsman was chosen, who belonged to a hereditary family of masons and not a Sikh or a Hindu artisan. This shows that the Maharaja was aware of the value of tradition. The building of Gobindgarh was also entrusted to a collective of craftsmen, specially Muslims who were descendants of the artisans who had built defence structures for the Mughals. It seems, then, that Maharaja Ranjit Singh had a sense of continuity from the past in his programme of expansion."

The Maharaja had great reverence for the written word and had men of letters like Fakir Aziz-ud-Din, the poet Syed Muhammad Hashim and artists like Attar Khan around him. He founded institutions of learning and aided a number of those already functioning, irrespective of who ran them. These included

Muslim *madrasas* and Hindu *pathshalas*. He instituted a calligraphy centre in Urdu and granted a *jagir* consisting of several villages to Mian Wada, devoted to the teaching of Persian. Similar bounties were bestowed upon several other individuals and institutions. He dictated all his orders in Punjabi which were recorded by *munshis*.

## The Last Battle

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a man of unusual vigour and vitality. However, over the years, he overstrained himself by engaging in some of the most difficult operations. His doctors regarded him as the most difficult patient and advised him rest but he hardly listened to them. Even after his first serious illness in 1826, the Maharaja refused to change his life style. Eight years later, the Maharaja got a second stroke which again occurred because of overexertion. The lack of rest and continuous exertion eroded the iron constitution of the Maharaja. A third stroke occurred in 1838 when the Maharaja was busy entertaining royal guests, including Lord Auckland, the then Governor-General of India. After this attack, the Maharaja still continued to manage the affairs of the State as efficiently as before till the final and fatal strokes on 22 June 1839. This invincible hero of many battles passed away on 27 June 1839.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh has been truly described as *Sher-e-Punjab*, the Lion of Punjab, and as a symbol of the Punjabi culture, he occupies a unique place in the history of Punjab for his outstanding personal qualities, and extraordinary achievements. Historians and chroniclers have called him the Napoleon of Asia and compared him with Bismarck and Cromwell. In the words of Wahid-ud-din a historian from Pakistan:

His name is still a household word in the province. His portrait is still preserved in castle and in cottage. It is a favourite subject with the ivory painters of Amritsar and Delhi. Ranjit Singh still lives, large as life, in the imagination of the people. He does so, not only where the Sikhs now live, but also where they lived before; for the Muslim village-folks shared him as a legendary figure with the Sikhs and they have not let him depart with the latter. Ranjit Singh's popular image is that of

a kindly patriarch rather than that of a conquering hero or a mighty monarch. He was all there, but his humanity has outlived his splendour and power.

To quote Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the second President of India:

Maharaja Ranjit Singh succeeded by personal valour and fair treatment in welding desperate elements into a well-knit kingdom which maintained its integrity and independence against difficult odds... we should remind ourselves of the policies and principles which this great leader followed in instilling a sense of unity among his people, irrespective of their differences in religion, custom and tradition. His example should inspire the present generation.

Dr. Zakir Hussain, the third President of India spoke of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the following words:

Great personalities are the most potent agencies of national education. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was such a personality for India one of the most outstanding ones during the 19th century. His force of character, his shrewdness, his statesmanship, his heroic courage, his large-hearted tolerance, his secular impartiality and benevolence, stand out... They stand out to sustain us in the formative years of our young national state.

Smt. Indira Gandhi, the late Prime Minister of India, once described the Maharaja in these words:

Maharaja Ranjit Singh is one of the outstanding men that our land has produced. Every school child knows him as the Lion of Punjab. His brilliance as a general and his statesmanship as a ruler have become household words.....I hope that the people of Punjab and the country at large will imbibe his message of unity and tolerance, courage and steadfastness.

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# MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH

- A Pictorial Profile

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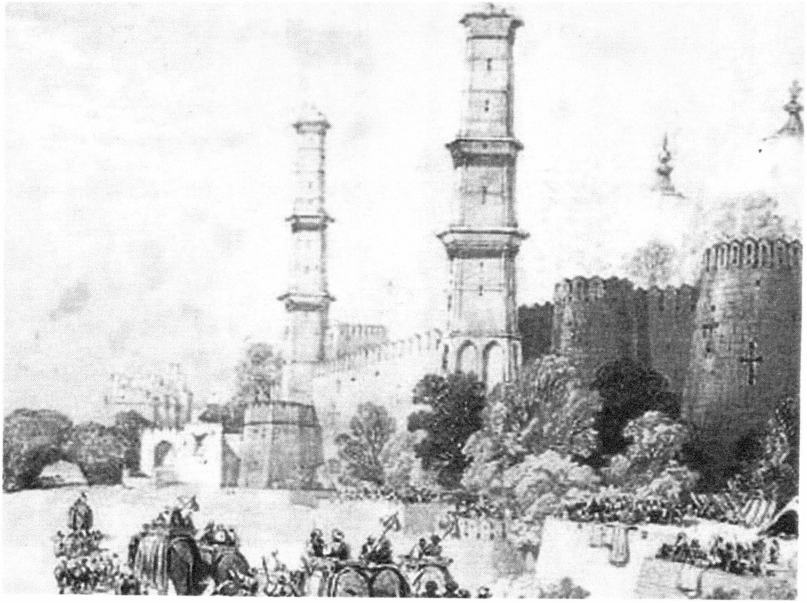
1839-40 Maharaja Ranjit Singh



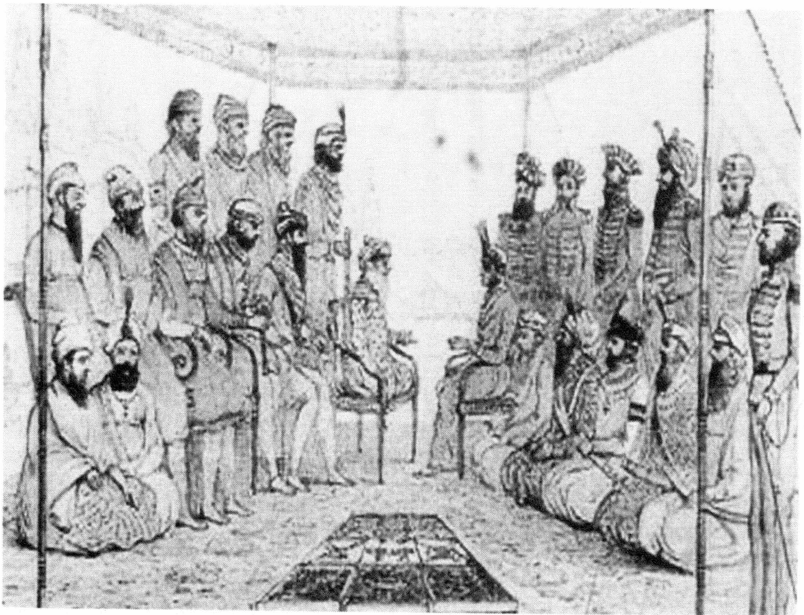
Maharaja Ranjit Singh among his generals



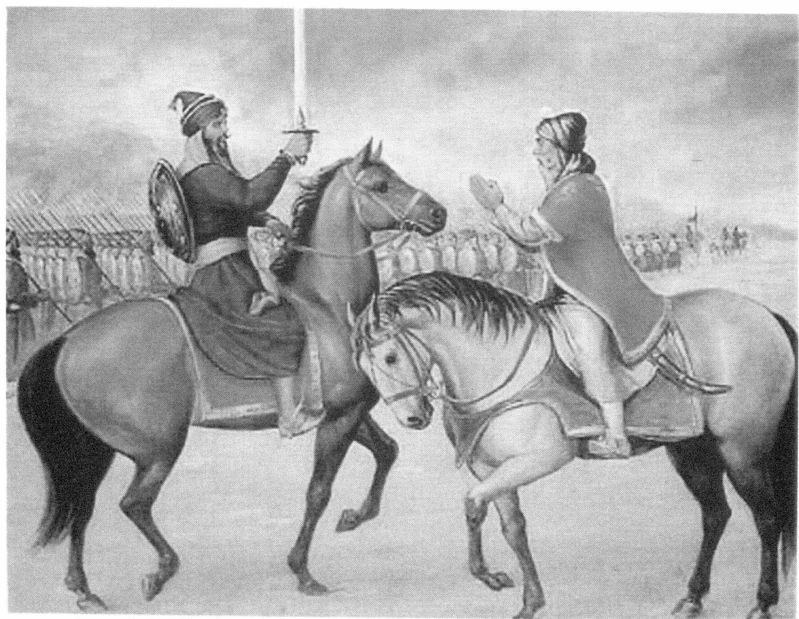
The Maharaja crossing the flooded Attock river



The Lahore Fort captured by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the year 1799



Maharaja Ranjit Singh with courtiers

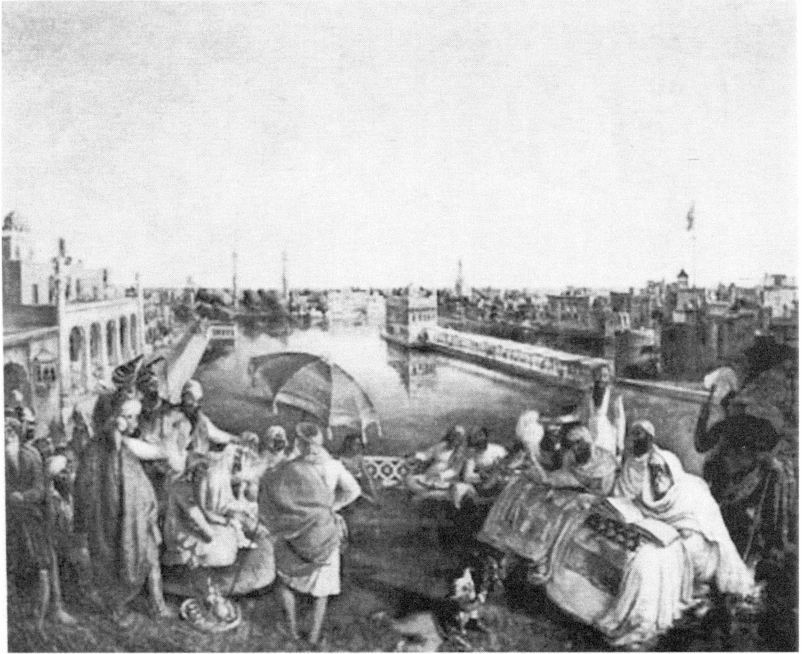


The monarch with Akali Phula Singh

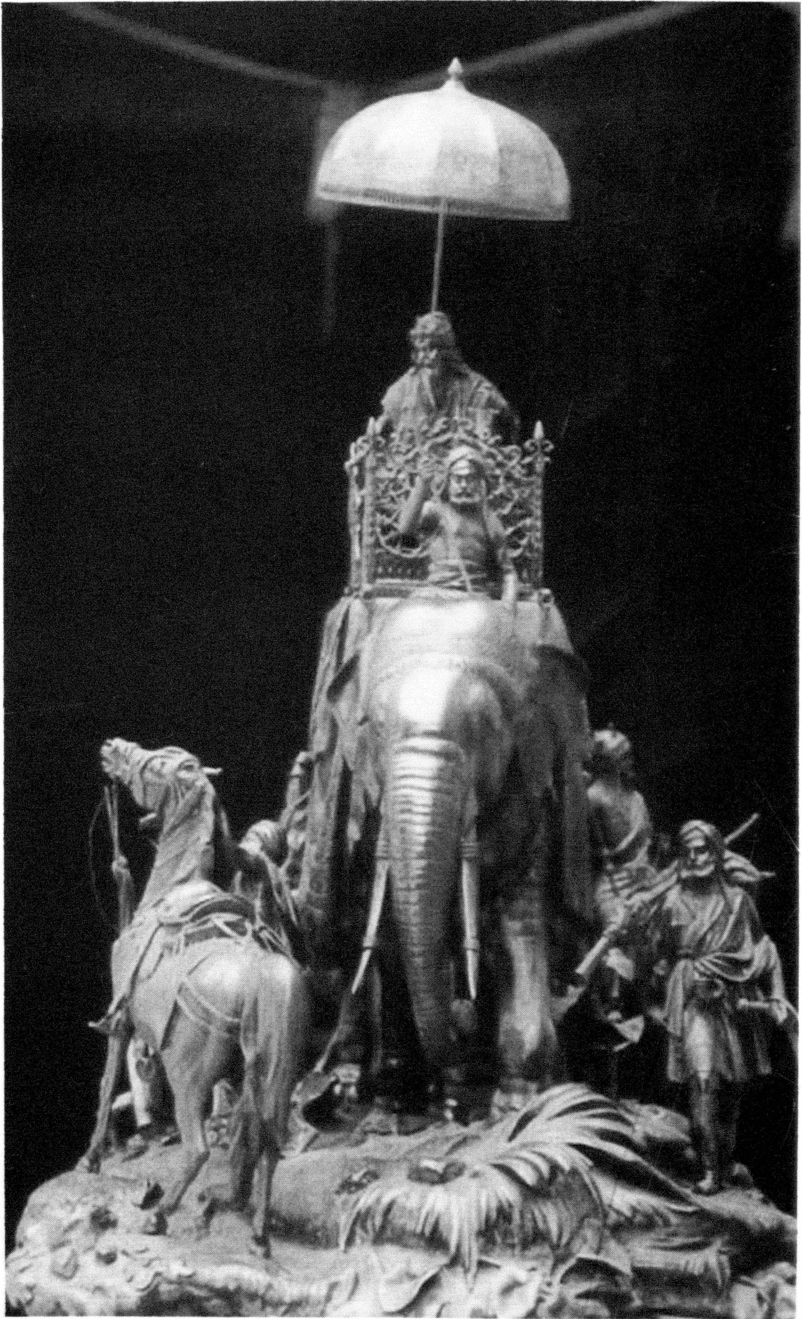




A painting of Maharaja Ranjit Singh issuing instructions



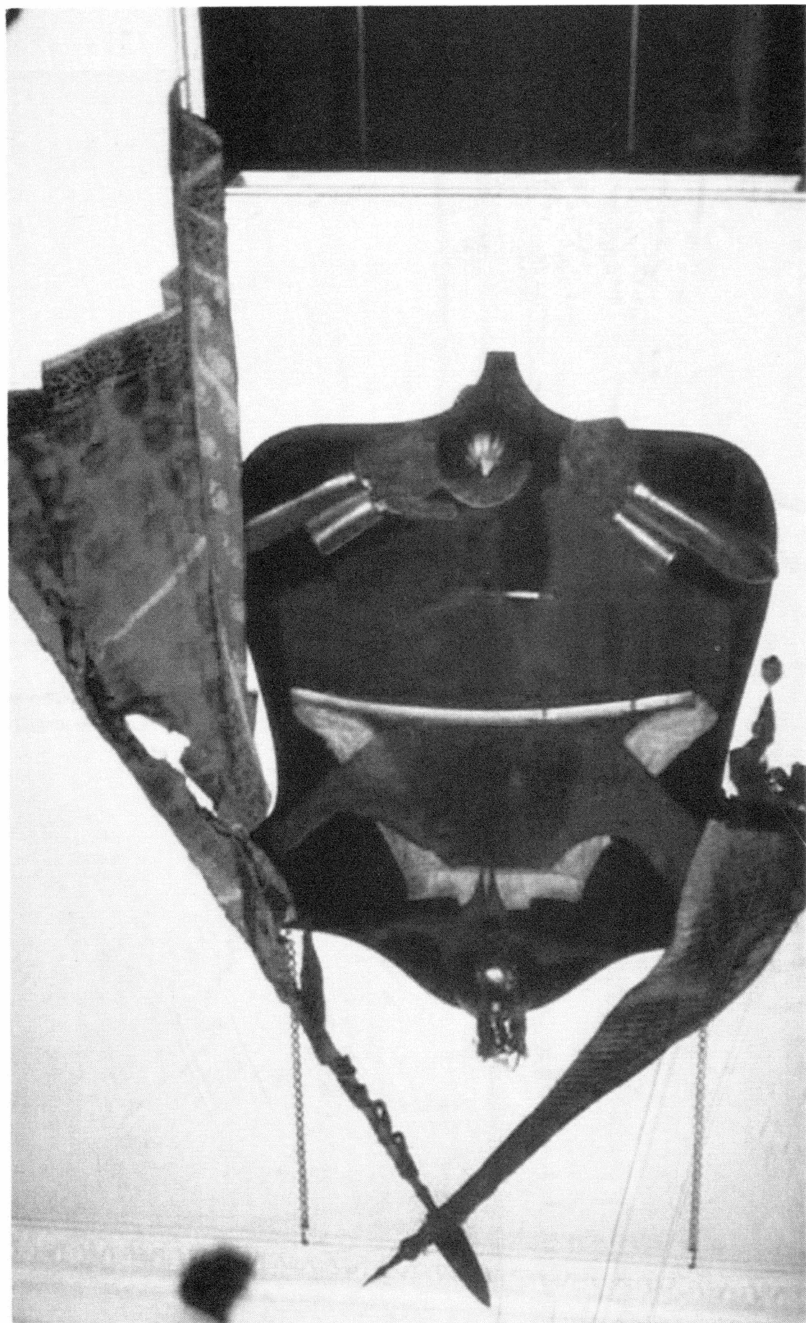
Listening to Guru Granth Sahib at Golden Temple, Amritsar



Sawari of Maharaja Ranjit Singh made of silver  
by Garard Company (UK)



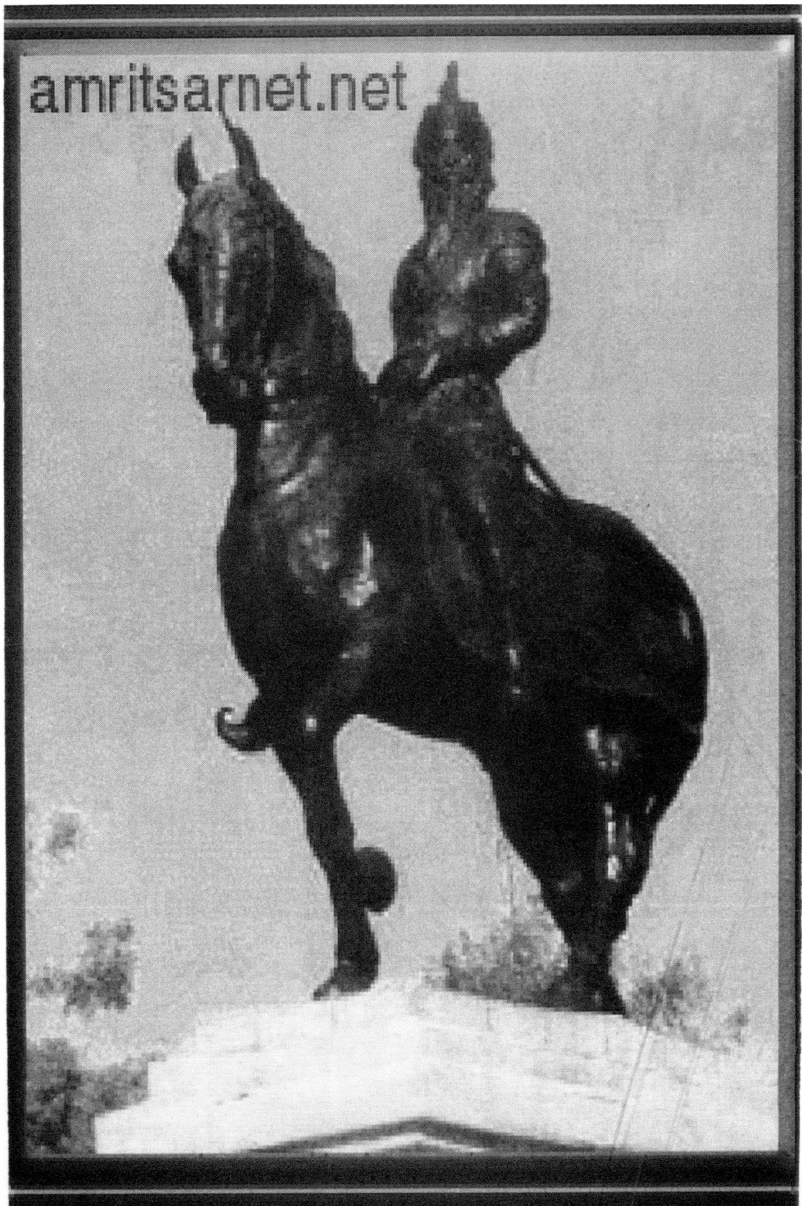
The golden throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh



Flag of Maharaja Ranjit Singh along with other relics



Gold token of Maharaja Ranjit Singh



A statue of Maharaja Ranjit Singh



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