

# **Maharaja Ranjit Singh:**

## **His Image and influence at Home and Abroad**

*Dr. Harnam Singh Shan, D. Litt\**

\* Formerly Professor & Chairman, Guru Nanak Chair, Head of the Department of Panjabi & Sikh Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh. [Address: 605 Sector 16-D, Chandigarh. 160015]

Maharaja Ranjit Singh indubitaly became a legenday figure both at home and abroad during his own life-time.

He is widely acclaimed and is justly called *sher-e-Punjab*, the lion of Panjab, in his homeland, the land of five rivers. Describing his popular image and continuing influence in its new Pakistani part, Faqir Waheed-ud-din, an erudite descendant of the Maharaja's foreign minister, Faqir Aziz-ud-din, recently stated, "Ranjit Singh still lives, large as life, in the imagination of the people. He does so not only where the Sikhs now live (i.e. in Indian Panjab), but also where they lived before (i.e. in its Pakistani part); for, the Muslim village-folk regarded him as a legendary figure as do the Sikhs and they have not let them depart with the latter. Ranjit Singh's popular image is that of a generous and gracious patriarch, rather than that of a conquering hero or a mighty monarch. He was all three, but his humanity has outlived his splendour and power."<sup>1</sup>

Miss Emily Eden, an eminent writer and artist of his times, who accompanied her brother, Lord Auckland, the then Governor-General of the British India, on his visit to the Maharaja in 1838, wrote soon after to her sister in London about him in almost similar terms: "He has made himself a great king; he conquered a great many powerful enemies; he is remarkably just in his government; he has disciplined a large army; he hardly ever takes away life, which is wonderful in a despot; and he is excessively beloved by his people. There is something rather touching in the affection his people have for him. It struck us all."<sup>2</sup>

**Extraordinary:** For such other Westerners, too, who happened to see or know him from close quarters and who have also recorded their observations and impressions in their respective chronicles, travelogues, correspondence, reports and histories such as the following, Maharaja Ranjit Singh was "an exceptional", "unique" and "an extraordinary man". According to:

Special Envoy of some European kings, e.g. Great Britain's King William's Sir Alexander Burnes, in his travelogue (1831-1833):

"Ranjit Singh is, in every respect, an extraordinary character. I have heard his French officers observe that he has no equal from Constantinople (Turkey) to India; and all of them have seen the immediate powers ... I have never quitted the presence of a native of India with such impression as I left this man. Without education and without a guide, he conducts all the affairs of his kingdom with surprising energy and vigour."<sup>3</sup>

France's **Victor Jacquement** in his letters to Paris (1829-1831):

"Ranjit Singh is a monarch absolutely independent and possessing the greatest power in Asia after the British... He is Bonaparte (Napoleon) in miniature. His conversation is like a nightmare. He is almost the first inquisitive Indian I have seen; and his curiosity balances the apathy of the whole of his nation... The most skilful of our diplomats is a complete simpleton before him."<sup>4</sup>

Some European kings and the Governor-General of British India also sought and cherished his friendship. For instance,

**Alexander Czar**, Emperor of Russia, in his letter dated 1821: "The traders of the Panjab will be well received on the Russian dominions... The Emperor is especially the well-wisher of the country reigned over by the king of the Sikhs."<sup>5</sup>

**Loui Phillip**, King of France, in his letter dated 27 Oct. 1835: "Although long distances and oceans part the kingdoms of the Panjab from that of France, this is no bar to the love that binds our hearts together."<sup>6</sup>

**Lord Auckland**, Governor-General of British India (1836-1842):

"Ranjit Singh is the most powerful and valuable of our friends... By the blessings of prudence, the English and the Sikh nations will be united to the end of time."<sup>7</sup>

**Wisdom:** His friendship, help and advice was similarly sought and valued by the rulers of some Indian states and the neighbouring countries. Captain J.D. Cunningham, the inimitable historian of the time, surveying the contemporary scene and his impact and influence in 1831, tells us, "The fame of Ranjit Singh was now at its height, and his friendship was sought by distant sovereigns. In 1829, agents from Baluchistan brought horses to the Sikh ruler, and hoped that the frontier posts of Harrand and Dajal, Westward of the Indus, which the feudatory of Bahawalpur had usurped, would be restored to the Khan. The Maharaja was, likewise, in communication with Shah Mahmud of Herat; and in 1830 he was invited by Baiza Bai of Gwalior to honour the nuptials of the young Scindhia with his presence.

The English were at the same time not without a suspicion that he had opened a correspondence with Russia, and they were themselves about to flatter him, as one necessary to the fulfilment of their expanding view of just influence and profitable commerce."<sup>8</sup> Again, in 1838, a year before the Maharaja's death, he adds, "Ostensibly Ranjit Singh had reached the summit of his ambition; he was acknowledged to be an arbiter in the fate of that empire which had tyrannized over his peasant forefathers, and he was treated with the greatest distinction by the foreign paramounts of India."<sup>9</sup>

As far as the native rulers were concerned, the paramounts of Marathas and Rohilas, Jaswant Rai Hoolkar and Amir Khan, respectively had rushed to Amritsar, his summer capital, in 1805 to seek his refuge from the onslaughts of the paramounts of the East India Company.<sup>10</sup>

Apa Sahib, the ruler of Nagpur, had similarly arrived in 1820 at Amritsar to seek his help from the impending assault of the British forces.<sup>11</sup> Amar Singh Thapa of Nepal also sought his friendship,<sup>12</sup> sent in 1825 his envoy to his court at Lahore<sup>13</sup> and presented two elephants to him in 1836 as token of strengthening his friendship.<sup>14</sup> He has been having secret correspondence with the Rajas of Rajasthan,<sup>15</sup> such as of Jodhpur and Marwar, as is evident from his letter dated 25 December 1822, addressed to Raja Man Singh regarding the request of Raja Randhir Singh of Bharatpur who was being threatened by the Britishers to dethrone him.<sup>16</sup>

Darvesh Muhammad, the Nizam of Hyderabad, presented him, through his envoy, four beautiful horses, a diamond-studded sword, an excellent gun and a highly precious and extremely embellished canopy in 1826 to establish friendly relations with him.

Some British generals and other army officers who dealt with him, his administration and army have also left indelible impressions and opinions about the qualities of his head and heart, his achievements and influence. For instance, according to -

**General Sir Charles Gough:**

"Ranjit Singh was an exceptional man... he possessed precisely the necessary qualities. His prowess was beyond question; the vigour and stewardness of his judgement were conspicuous; his promptitude of action was obvious... He possessed in a very high degree one particular kingly quality not usually conspicuous in Oriental monarchs - he always knew exactly how far he could go. However large and far-reaching his ultimate designs might be, his immediate measures were always practicable. He made each step secure before he took the next....."<sup>17</sup>

**General Sir John Gordon:**

"Ranjit Singh was a unique personality..."<sup>18</sup>

**Colonel Alexander Gardner:**

"The Maharaja was, indeed, one of the master-minds which only require opportunity to change the face of the globe..."<sup>19</sup>

**Captain W.G. Osborne, Military Secretary to the Governor-General:**

"Ranjit Singh cannot fail to strike everyone as that of a very extraordinary man... The more I see of him, the more he strikes me as an extraordinary man..."

**Incisive Intellect:**

"He was one of that order of minds which seem destined by nature to win their way to distinction and achieve greatness... Perfectly uneducated, unable even to read or write, he has, by his own natural and unassisted intellect, raised himself from the situation of a private individual to that of a despotic monarch over a turbulent and powerful nation. By sheer force of mind, personal energy, and courage... he has established his throne on a firmer foundation than that of any other

eastern sovereign; and but for the watchful jealousy of the British government, would long ere this have added Sind, if not Afghanistan, to his present kingdom."

"His character was that of a generous and liberal master; and it was his custom to go into action with his arms covered with golden bracelets, and to reward with a pair of them any act of personal courage on the part of his soldiers which might happen to meet his observation."<sup>20</sup>

#### **Captain L.V. Orlich:**

"In battle, he was always seen at the head of his troops and foremost in combat; he twice crossed the Indus with his cavalry in the face of the enemy, and gained the victory. In energy of will and endurance, he was unequalled by any of his people."<sup>21</sup>

"With all the magnificence which prevailed at his court, he himself was very simple in his attire, and wore but few ornaments, but loved to see show and splendour in everything about him."<sup>22</sup>

#### **Dr. W.L. McGregor:**

"It is evident that he is no common character, but possessed of powers of mind rarely met with either in the Eastern or the western world.

"There is no instance of his being embarrassed or evincing anything like fear."<sup>23</sup>

#### **T.H. Thornton:**

"Runjeet Singh has been likened to Mehmet Ali and to Napoleon. Mr Jacquemont terms him a 'Bonaparte in Miniature'. There are some point in which he resembles both; both estimating his character with reference to his circumstances and position, he is, perhaps, a more remarkable man than either."<sup>24</sup>

#### **Sir Lepel Griffin:**

"He was a born ruler, with the natural genius for command. Men obeyed him by instinct... The control which he exercised, even in the closing years of his life, over the whole Sikh people, nobles, priests and people was the measure of his greatness."<sup>25</sup>

**Legendary Fame:** The name and fame of Maharaja Ranjit Singh had spread far and wide to such an extent that it attracted a number of adventurous foreigners to visit the empire and see him personally.

Von Baron Charles Hugel, the first-every traveller who came to India from Austria during his reign, has narrated in his travelogue, published in 1845: "In Europe I had heard of the most powerful Maharaja of Lahore, who ... not only afforded protection to travellers visiting Panjab but received them with distinction at his Court... Upon my arrival in Hindustan, the accounts which I had heard in the course of my travels... were not only confirmed, but proved to me to be much stranger than I had even imagined... From the Maharaja I experienced not only the

protection and munificence becoming a great king, but his kindness has also left a lasting impression on me."<sup>26</sup>

He also tells us that he was very keen to see the legendary Maharaja; his well-known general, Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa, his famous horse, Lalli; and his matchless diamond, Koh-i-Noor all by himself, with his own eyes.<sup>26</sup>

The Jewish -turned-Christian missionary, Dr. Joseph Wolff, came also on a somewhat similar mission during 1831-32. According to him, "Runjeet Singh has proved to the Mussalmans pretty well that the edge of the sword is not always evidence of the truth of religion; for, the name of Runjeet Singh is a terror from Lahore to the city of Bokhara - his sword having defeated the Mohammedans in every battle."<sup>27</sup>

**Military Genius:** They - and some more British officers stationed at the East India Company's residency in Delhi and Agency at Ludhiana - have also recorded their first-hand information and have, in addition given graphic accounts of the Maharaja's kingdom, army court and some distinguishing traits of his personality.

About his kingdom, Major Lawrence has provided us with Maharaja's own statement dated 5 May 1830, claiming that "My kingdom is a great kingdom. It was small, it is now large; it was scattered, broken, and divided; it is now consolidated... Its territory now extends to the borders of Chin (China) and the limits of the Afghans, with all of Multan and the rich possessions beyond the Sutlej."<sup>28</sup>

British General Gough has called it "a unique phenomenon in history."<sup>29</sup> According to the Austrian traveller Hugel, "The kingdom founded by Ranjit Singh, who, like a skillful architect, has formed of so many insignificant unpromising fragments, one majestic fabric, seemed to me the most wonderful object in the whole world."<sup>30</sup>

About his glory and strategy the historian John Marshman tells us, "It was his extraordinary talent along which reared the edifice of Sikh greatness, and if he had not been hemmed in by the irresistible power of the Company, he would undoubtedly have established a new and magnificent empire in Hindoostan. He succeeded to the leadership of his tribe at the early age of seventeen, when the Punjab was distracted by the conflicts of its various independent chieftains. He left it a compact and powerful kingdom, strengthened by the annexation of some of the richest provinces of the Doorian Empire."<sup>31</sup> Colonel Gardner and Geographer Vigne have also vouchsafed the veracity of this observation by stating in their respective memoirs:

"Ranjit Singh ... would have carried his conquests to Delhi, or even farther, had it not been for the simultaneous rise and consolidation of the British empire in India."<sup>32</sup>

"If he had not been restrained by the gigantic power of the East India Company, Ranjit Singh would long ago have been seated on the throne of Delhi."<sup>33</sup>

As regards the Afghans and Afghanistan which have now become the burning problem of the entire world, Ranjit Singh dealt a severe blow to them and their onslaughts almost soon after his

taking over the reins of Lahore. So much so that Mr. Collins, the then British Resident at Delhi wrote, as follows, on 16 October 1800 to his Governor-General at Calcutta:

"At present, this chief is regarded throughout Hindustan as the protector of the Sikh nation; it being generally believed that were it not for the fortitude and excellent conduct of Ranjit Singh, the whole of the Punjab would ere this have become a desert-waste, since it is the boast of these northern savages (i.e. the Afghans) that the grass never grows where their horses have trodden."<sup>34</sup>

Shah Zaman, their ruler of the day, sought during that very year Maharaja's friendship by sending precious presents to him. Later, in 1811, he sought his refuge at Lahore when he had to quit Kabul. The liberal and kind-hearted Maharaja welcomed and helped him accordingly.<sup>35</sup> Regarding the annexation of its entire territory to the Maharaja's kingdom, Jacquemont, the French envoy, wrote in 1830 to his government at Paris in these words:

"Should Ranjit Singh think he could prudently absent himself for sometime from the Panjab, nothing would be easier for him than to reconquer the whole of Afghanistan."<sup>36</sup>

**Strategist:** They, and some other foreigners, have been all praise for the army of his great kingdom. "By indefatigable exertions", says Marshman, "by the adoption of every improvement he could hear of, and by incessant and successful expeditions, he succeeded in creating an army of 80,000 strong with 300 pieces of cannon, superior in discipline, colour and equipment to any force which had ever been in India under native colours."<sup>37</sup>

Recording his observation about his artillery on 22 June 1836, Auckland's Military Secretary, Captain Osborne remarked, "He is very proud of the efficiency and admirable condition of his artillery; and justly so, for no Indian power has yet possessed so large and well-disciplined a corps."<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, about his cavalry the Austrian traveller, Baron Hugel, wrote on 21 January 1836 in his travelogue, "I requested leave to inspect them (the *Ghorcharhas*), and never beheld a finer nor a more remarkably-striking body of men."<sup>39</sup>

Major Smyth a senior officer of the British Agency at Ludhiana went on to state in his chronicle: "it is a force such as no Eastern power had ever possessed."<sup>40</sup>

According to General Gough, who commanded the British forces in the Anglo-Sikh wars and wrote about those: "The Sikh army was the most efficient, the hardest to overcome, that we have ever faced in India."<sup>41</sup>

John Lawrence described it as a "formidable army which" according to him "was truly the Sikh people in arms, *a militant incarnation of their religion*."<sup>42</sup>



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