

# Maharaja Ranjit Singh Remembered: The Anglo-Sikh Relations

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*\* Chairman, National Commission for Minorities, Lok Nayak Bhavan, New Delhi. 110003. Text of a speech delivered at a Seminar organised by the Maharaja Ranjit Singh Trust, New Delhi. The other speaker: Sir Michael Arthur, British High Commissioner - among the distinguished audience were: Mr. LM Singhvi, former Indian High Commissioner in UK, and Dr. Jagmohan, former Union Minister & Governor of Jammu & Kashmir - Founder of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh Trust.*

*@ June 30 marks the death anniversary of Sher-e-Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh.*

AT THE OUTSET LET ME congratulate trustees of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh Trust, specially Sr. K.S. Bains and Sr. Vikramjit Singh Sahni. This is perhaps the first ever attempt to organise a proper lecture on Anglo-Sikh relations, which is still a controversial issue. Many books have been written about our relations. I must thank the High Commissioner who in his lecture has covered all the points in such details. Most of us who are here today did not know these earlier.

Everyone is aware that East India Company captured almost entire India because they needed a big market. By 1800 A.D. India became part of British Empire. For fifty years, the boundary of India which was with British remained upto River Satluj and the part beyond Satluj was the Sikh territory. The Britishers recognised that Punjab was under a Sovereign Ruler, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Our friendship started at that time. About the cordial relationship between the Maharaja and British rulers many people have raised objections and I have read two or three articles on this subject. The first treaty of friendship between the Sikhs and the Governor General was signed in 1809, which was between two sovereigns. This is known as treaty of Amritsar. It was written that British and Ranjit Singh are two sovereigns having different territories. Sikhs and Britishers shall remain friend of each other and will help each other. This treaty and friendship was praised by historians and was honoured by both sides till the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

During forty years rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, we had best of our relations with British. Some critics say that had Maharaja Ranjit Singh at that time crossed Satluj and invaded India he would have finished the British Raj in India. Some people say if Britishers had not signed the treaty, they would have capture the Punjab. This murmuring is still alive. But everyone recognizes the might of Khalsa force created by Maharaja Ranjit Singh and also believe that his army was first such army in India which was trained on European style. The Sikhs were trained by French generals, details have been written by Mr. Lafont. The strength of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Sikh army was well known. The British leaders at that time were of the firm opinion that they should remain friends. It is recorded that during those 40 years there were gifts from King of England to Ranjit Singh, who sent horses from London to Lahore. Maharaja Ranjit Singh reciprocated by sending memorable gifts to His Majesty.

During the visit of Lord William Bentick, the Governor General of India to Punjab, for the first time Britishers could see the display not only of the might of army but also of the wealth of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Graphic accounts have been written about the Ropar meeting between the two rulers and the Commander in Chiefs of both armies. Later on at the wedding of Kunwar Naunihal Singh, grandson of

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Governor General came himself. Many dignitaries came to Amritsar at that time. The Governor General also went to Golden Temple. Both parties always tried to evaluate the situation.

In spite of recurring doubts created on different issues, the Anglo-Sikh relations remained intact till 1845 A.D. You know we have a unique habit and strange characteristics. We believe in love and hate. After death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the treaty was over. The intrigues inside the court and the role of traitors brought us face to face. We fought wars, the first Anglo-Sikh war and second Sikh war. Though we were defeated but the history recorded by the Britishers themselves says that was the real battle which British faced in India. Soon after they took over Punjab in 1849, the first mutiny in India arose in 1857. Now here I must clear the record because a lot has been said about the role of Sikhs in this struggle. The Sikh leaders at that time never believed that it was the war of independence. They never agreed that India is going to be relieved of British Empire. They were of the view that Mughal Raj was being brought back.

The Sikhs, at that crucial hour, gave full support to the British. If you go to Trafalgar Square in London, there is a life-size statue of General Howard who was the General of British Army in Delhi. It is written beneath his statue that he is the man who saved British Empire in India in 1857 with the help of Sikh army. We at that time helped the Britishers to curb the mutiny in India. That was the first step of our cordial relationship after our defeat at their hands in 1849. And soon after the Britishers helped Punjab by building new canals and railway system. They gave full economic benefits to people of Punjab. And this continued till the First World War was over. In the first World War we helped the Allies. But soon after the war, the Gadar Movement was started by the Sikhs to overthrow British Empire in India. It was the battle waged by the Sikhs who came from Canada and USA. Soon after the tragic incident of Jalianwala Bagh, the Gurdwara movement was started by the Sikhs. It was against the government of the day. And when the Sikhs won the 'Morcha' of Nankana Sahib, Mahatma Gandhi said that the first battle of independence has been won in India. The Sikhs have played a major role in the freedom movement. I do not want to give details of how much we suffered in freedom movement. At the time of second World War, there was a call of its boycott by Mahatma Gandhi. And at that time there was crisis in India. But history says that Master Tara Singh, the leader of the Sikhs openly gave a call that Sikhs will give recruitment, we will help the Allies and finish the dictatorship of Germany. And in that war we suffered the maximum. Ninety seven thousand Sikhs gave their lives. They died to protect the democracies of Europe.

When Mr. L.M. Singhvi was High Commissioner of India in UK, he invited me for a lecture in the House of Lords. In my speech I said that they say that UK helped us economically, I told them to remember that we gave blood for them which cannot at any time be compensated with economic benefits. Shedding blood for the sake of democracy has no parallel. In that War we won many gallantry awards including Victoria Cross.

But when the Partition came, there was a big question mark about Indo-Sikh relations. The Sikhs at large were let down by the British Government. Till today, people are not reconciled to the fact that the British Government at that time never cared to keep in mind the role of Sikhs in the World Wars. And in the Partition the

Sikh community suffered maximum. Half of our community which was better off on Pakistan side, were rendered homeless. We had a claim on Lahore and Montgomri which were developed by the Sikhs. The entire area was Sikh dominated but Britain never helped us at that juncture. People have grouse on the wrong division of Punjab and especially the treatment to us. And there is today a whispering campaign against Master Tara Singh as to why did he take a stand to help Britain in Second World War. But soon after the Partition, you were helpful and we were thankful to you to allow the Sikhs to migrate and settle in England. The help given by the Britishers to allow us to come to their country cannot be overlooked. Half a million Sikhs are there. The Britishers are real democratic, they believe in freedom of speech even at the time when the fight was going on with them. They allowed the Sikhs in UK to settle and provided them with economic benefits and today we have Sikh members in the House of Commons. We have Sikh members in the House of Lords. We have Sikh Mayors in many cities and they are feeling as part of the British system. And our new generations are fully happy.

I must add few points here for consideration of Mr. Arthur. There is one historic incident which is being taught in France schools - that is Battle of Saragarhi. UNESCO has published a book about the battles in the world which they consider are famous for collective courage of the soldiers. They have found six battles in the world and one of those is Saragarhi battle. It was fought in 1892 between the Sikh troops stationed in a Saragarhi outpost beyond Khyber Pass. It was attacked by the tribes of Afghanistan and 21 Sikh soldiers headed by S. Ishar Singh died but they defended the post which was attacked by 10,000 people. All the Members of House of Commons, when they heard the news stood up and all the 21 Sikh soldiers were given the Victoria Cross, which was highest gallantry award. That battle is part of the British history. We have a memorial of Saragarhi in Ferozpur but there is no mention of that battle in Britain. Please put up one memorial in London to show how we fought that battle and displayed our courage.

I have few more suggestions to make: A Memorial of Maharaja Duleep Singh - son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh who died in UK should be raised and a statue should be installed. Mr. Singhvi can help us in this venture. I have mentioned a number of times to many British Ministers coming here about Elveden Hall which was purchased with the money of the Punjab Government for Dalip Singh by the British government. After Dalip Singh parted with the Crown that house was sold and it is with a private person. That house should be restored to the Sikhs to convert that into a museum which would become a permanent museum of Anglo-Sikhs relations. And there are hundreds of our relics in British museums which are not on display. My request is that British Government should help the Sikhs to have a proper museum or a Sikh gallery in UK which would also be a sort of permanent house for Anglo-Sikh relations. It will show as to how our community has played such a big role. And our tradition of bravery and spirituality should be known to the people in Britain. Lastly the British should now have a proper battalion of the Sikhs and it should be in UK as a part of your army. There are lots of Sikhs in UK who are willing to join British Army and you can have a full-fledged Sikh regiment so that our old tradition of bravery could be kept alive.

I need not go on elaborating. I feel that Sir Michael Arthur's lecture is not enough on this subject. As I said earlier we should have a series of lectures because there

are many grey areas, many controversial issues which are required to be discussed at length. There are many people sitting here who can throw light on those. Mr. Jagmohan himself can do it. We all can learn from such people because history has not done justice to the Sikhs. You will be amazed to know that when with the help of Mr. Jagmohan, we organised the first function for Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Vigyan Bhawan, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee was kind enough to preside over that function. Mr. Jagmohan presented a replica to the Chair made in gold for the Sikh museum at Amritsar. At that function, Prime Minister himself stated that Maharaja Ranjit Singh has not been properly mentioned in the books of Indian history. You can understand that the last sovereign of our country has not been mentioned in our books. What a big discrimination not only with Sikh community but with history and also with Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Even there is no mention about the role of the Sikhs in the economic development of the country. There is no mention of how many Sikhs died in World War I. (1914-18) and World War II (1939-45)

There are many such issues which need elaboration. But since today, we are confining ourselves only to Anglo-Sikh relations, I request Mr. Bains and Mr. Vikramjit Singh that we should have series of such lectures because this issue is very much alive and people want to know more and more of it. I thank Maharaja Ranjit Singh Trust for their brilliant idea of organising this seminar. The audience having such large VIPs sitting here all along is a proof that people are anxious to hear such lectures. This is for the first time during the last fifty years that a UK High Commissioner in India has openly come out with a lecture on this subject and let us hope that we continue with this. I thank you all for giving me this opportunity to express my views on this subject.

