

Maharaja Ranjit Singh as Patron of the Arts

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June 30 marks the 167th death anniversary of the Sikh monarch.

Our recall of the heritages of the past are not from the wish to revive bygone splendours, which cannot come back. We wish to show how the purposive will of men in certain periods of our history, have created, out of anarchy and disorder, glories which heightened the quality of life and which may inspire our renascent efforts today.

Although there was no period in the history of our sub-continent, when the vast landscapes did not see infiltrations, invasions and onslaughts from without, and constant disruption through internecine quarrels of one chieftain with another, there were a few periods during which heroes appeared, who could, by their practical genius; insight and visionary oversight, connect the fighting factions, reorganize the shattered principalities, evolve some kind of order, and restore the faith of people in life itself.

One of the last such heroes of feudal India was Ranjit Singh, who became Maharaja of Punjab in his teens, and consolidated an Empire, stretching from the Sutlej on the south to Afghanistan in the north, Kashmir and Ladakh on the East to Sind on the West.

And, in spite of the rigours of the bitter struggles to unite the disparate elements, to subdue the recalcitrant princes, nobles and landlords, with all the difficulties of bypassing intrigues, punishing treachery and creating a relatively just and humane order, he released the creative energies of people to build buildings worthy of the new empire, evolve the arts for the enjoyment of the good life, and recognize the beauty of well-made things.

There is no gainsaying the fact that, though he was essentially a military genius and therefore roughened by the ups and downs of battles, as also forced to be hard-headed in administering the new kingdom, he became daily involved in integrating men and women into togetherness. And he could withdraw into his own zenana and seek to recreate himself, by witnessing dance, hearing music, hold durbar, preferably in the garden, receive the craftsmen and encourage them to produce gifts worthy of exchange between himself and the representatives of the powers around him.

It is likely that the patronage he gave to the artisans was in emulation of the example set by the previous monarchs, specially the Mughals.

But there seems to have been, behind the daily conversations with his nobles, organizing of the army, appointing officers to collect revenue and sundry preoccupations of the monarchical routine, his own personal need to refurbish the faith in himself.

In the various gestures he made, to involve the sanctions of humanness from the first Master of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak, he seems to show his aspirations to build the personal myth of a man, who had not only shaped an empire with his sword, but brought congregations of peoples of different religions through genuine and heartfelt tolerance.

His humility is obvious, for instance, in that, when he issued the coins of his empire, he struck them not in his own name, but in the name of the Guru, 'the real king'. As the historian, Professor Ganda Singh, has pointed out 'the rupee and paisa were called Nanak Shahi.' And the inscription on them in Persian when translated meant:

'Kettle: (symbol of the pot from which the poor were fed)

Sword: (symbol of the power to protect the meek and helpless)

Victory and unhesitating

Patronage have been offered,

from Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh.’

The reference to the Gurus in the language of inscription shows Ranjit Singh’s imaginative fervour, which was looking for some certainty in the midst of chaos.

Born to the Sikh faith, he could not seek godhood for himself. But he connected himself with divineness as a magical protection against the mutability of things around him. Strangely enough, in exalting the masters above himself, he sanctified the myth of his own supremacy and symbolically associated his divine right to rule the empire.

As a daring youth following the example of his dynamic father, Mahan Singh, of the Sukkerchakkia Misl, Ranjit Singh had inherited the single-mindedness of Guru Gobind Singh in invoking the ultimate will.

In the stresses of more than a hundred battles, through the periods of the personal dangers, when he accepted, perhaps to impress his followers with his own courage, the gathering of the clans by restoring human relations cut off through jealousies, and the slow tortuous integration of the mass from within the chaos, perhaps gave him an inexpressible will power. In the midst of the broken peoples of all the faiths, who had been accepting oppression of the various marauding chieftains, he won fame from the glitter of arms. Silent before every terror, every possibility and every opposition, he seems to have derived, from the depths of the Punjab earth, the stoical virtue of silence, mumbling under his breath the sacred words of Guru Nanak from *Asa-di-var*:

ਲਬੁ ਪਾਪੁ ਦੁਇ ਰਾਜਾ ਮਹਤਾ ਕੂੜੁ ਹੋਆ ਸਿਕਦਾਰੁ ॥

ਕਾਮੁ ਨੇਬੁ ਸਦਿ ਪੁਛੀਐ ਬਹਿ ਬਹਿ ਕਰੇ ਬੀਚਾਰੁ ॥

ਐਧੀ ਰਯਤਿ ਗਿਆਨ ਵਿਹੁਣੀ ਭਾਹਿ ਭਰੇ ਮੁਰਦਾਰੁ ॥

[SGGS:468]

He must have recalled the momentous occasion of the day of the harvest festival, when Guru Gobind Singh baptised the Sikh (*Shishya* - disciple), into singhs or lions, considering each one of them a ‘host of one lakh and a quarter.’ And he had grasped the essence of his inherited faith in love - not as a system of philosophy but as a *discipline*.

And, as he had collected soldiers of all faiths, he implicitly proclaimed the truth of the phrase in the *Akal Ustat* – ‘recognize all human nature as one’.

Inured by instinctive nearness to the outcasts who fought for him, he had discarded the contempt of untouchability and recruited the lowliest into his service.

As he gathered strength in his youth, and was offered the throne of Lahore, he united most of the misls or clans, into common defence of the new state against the surrounding enemies; he uplifted the head of each misl into exalted generals, nobles and ministers, along with the wisest Hindu counsellors, Muslim princes, administrators and, later, he even attracted European soldiers of fortune into his court.

In this way he went astride the fixation of theocracy, but showed the way towards an order, beyond differentiation, towards the obscure unity which people had longed for, but which no one dared to create. By dint of his genuine acceptance of all the peoples, with a liberality, strange in a torn world, he created a mosaic from the necessity of ending petty feuds. Maybe it was from the sense of freedom from smallness, the spectacular example of his personal heroism, the dramatic contrast between the previous chaos and the emergent unity, that the primitivist world around him began to assume the form of a court order.

Certainly, the ethos of the Sikh faith, with its prophetic vision of equality of peoples, was the core of the truth in Ranjit Singh, but by deliberately choosing those people who would join the struggles with him he made a world of heroism out of the despair of his time.

The simple teachings of his ancestral faith had always emphasized simplicity, sincerity and

humanities. From the first Master downwards the Masters had not renounced the world but accepted the mundane life against the Advaita Hindu rejection of the earth as Maya, illusion. And, though the nobles of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's court came from the misls lorded over by big landlords, the bulk of the army was recruited from among the peasantry of the Jat tribes and those many pariahs who had embraced the egalitarian faith. The hero, however: who generally raises himself, above others, is often alone and therefore seeks communion with his fellowmen.

In some letters written by an inmate of the Maharaja's household in Persian, found in the Peshwa's records in Pune, there are vivid descriptions of his daily routine.

Let us quote one of these reports at random:

Deohri of Sardar Ranjit Singh Bahadur

Monday dated 19th Rabi-us-Sami, 1229 A. H. (12th April 1814)

the Shalimar Gardens, Lahore.

The special royal horses were sent to Amritsar. Six gunners from among the companions of Mir Mazhar Ali, the Darogha of the Topkhana driven by horses, who were in prison with the noble Sarkar, were pardoned for their faults, and released after being granted one "Ilaga" each. A robe of honour consisting of three garments was given to Hakim Nur-ud-Din Khan, who was allowed to depart towards Wazirabad and Sialkot. The villages in the division of Taregarh were given to Garwa Singh. Sukh Dial stated that he had sent five hundred rupees to the camp of Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk who had returned them. Diwan Bhawani Dass stated that Ram Singh, the manager of the affairs of Kanwar Kharak Singh, had already seized the boxes belonging to Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk while he was on his way to Rawalpindi and that it appeared that Hari Singh, the representative of the noble Sarkar, had stolen some articles of jewellery out of them. The noble Sarkar sent for that person. He sent a message to the camps of Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk, asking him to send his reliable person to accompany his stirrup upto Amritsar. The iron-smiths of Kotli presented ten gurus. When six hours of the day were left the noble Sarkar rode with his associates and other attendants and entered the Shalimar Gardens. Kanwar Kharak Singh came together with Ram Singh and stated that he had left all the troops with him at Shekhupura and had come all alone to take a sacred bath at Amritsar. The noble Sarkar said it was all right. All's well otherwise.

As soon as the kingdom began to be consolidated, we can see Maharaja Ranjit Singh bearing all the burdens stoically. And he wishes to flow to the rhythm of life along with others, taking pleasure in the visit to Shalimar Gardens even while attending to preparations for a march. There is visible acceptance of death with its severity. But in the life threatened by annihilation, he concentrates on living. In fact, it seems that, far from making life meaningless, the recognition of possible death in battle gave life and added value in his eyes.

So it was that he seemed to recover from every struggle the intensity of the life force, and went on to achieve triumphs, in spite of frustrations, dangers and lapses by his officers.

Concretely, he found communion with himself through constant withdrawals. And he retained the vigours of his healthy Jat passions and could recover from shocks by participation in the life of pleasure. Escaping from morbid nightmares of the closed circle of exalted persons, he opened up, from the vacuums, affections for his big family.

These participations took the form of involvement with the making of beautiful things, which he wished to patronise, specially to give as gifts of artistically made objects, medals, paintings, shawls, ivories, and utensils.

The art under Maharaja Ranjit Singh are the arts of hedonism, in the enjoyment of beauties of things of everyday life.

When Lahore became the secular capital, the need to build *havelis* for the Sardars arose. There had to be masons for the walls, carpenters to make finely carved doors and windows, lacquer workers, mirror workers for the ceilings of the rooms of the *zenanas*, weavers of shawls for presentation, tailors for the costumes of the courtiers, armourers to make swords, shields, and helmets for the army, the *thathiars* to make utensils for households, painters of portraits of the grandees, coiners of currency. In fact, there was the need of all the crafts to build the new life. And Artisans from various parts of Punjab, Rajasthan and Mughal India came into the northern city.

During the brief near-quarter of the initiation of a new order, it was not possible to create a so-called classical 'art' in Ranjit Singh's court. But the vitalities of the folk artisans were released. And a new authentic style arose, which is resilient, truthful, and pragmatic in its expression of human impulses.

The hallmark of the art of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is thus its truthfulness. It is of the earthly earth. And, in spite of the import of some of the painters from the Pahari courts, the abundance of portraiture shows how almost everyone, including the Maharaja, were in search of an identity in their new exalted status, which they had acquired from modest origins in the villages of the Punjab plains. Thus every expression under the patronage of Ranjit Singh and his nobles, shows a vitalist urge for freedom to open out to life, and more life, in the midst of things of beauty which may please the eyes, make the heart glow and intensify the emotions.

Everyone knows that Maharaja Ranjit Singh had only one eye, but one is inspired by the vision in that one eye to say: 'What an eye!'

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