

"The Real Ranjit Singh": An Account based on Archives of the Fakir family

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History is not science and it can be twisted to suit the whims of the ruling class. Much has been written about Maharaja Ranjit Singh during his bicentenary to eulogize his achievements. No doubt he was a great ruler who liberated Punjab from the clutches of Afghan invaders and created a secular state in India, but he had all the vices of a medieval monarch. The most authentic source about the personal life of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is the book written by Fakir Syed Waheed-ud-Din of Lahore, a doyen and descendant of the famous Fakir family which served with the Sikh monarch dedication and devotion. The book is based on the archival material in the possession of the Fakir family. It resolves some of the mysteries about Maharaja's personal life and state policy.

Personal Character: The author writes that Maharaja Ranjit Singh entered Lahore Fort as a conqueror on July 7, 1799. He was admonished by a holy 'voice' to obey four 'commandments' as a ruler, if he wanted to prosper:

1. To say his prayers every morning without fail.
2. Never to hold court sitting on the throne of the Mughal emperors.
3. To treat his subjects equally, without distinction of caste or creed.
4. To respect and befriend Fakir family which would serve him truly and well as a spiritual guardian of the new state.

These four 'commandments' became the cornerstone of his state policy. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a devout Sikh and his daily routine began with early morning prayers and listening to recitation of Guru Granth Sahib. He started his military campaigns after seeking guidance or '*hukumnama*' from Guru Granth Sahib. He had a profound reverence for all that was holy and spiritual, irrespective of what religion it pertained to. He paid regular visits to Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) on special occasions. His visits to the shrines of Muslim saints and Hindu temples were as much acts of faith as those to the Golden Temple. He donated liberally to the religious places of all sects in Punjab. He participated in religious festivals of both Hindus and Muslims. Thus he was the first true Sikh - as secular king of Punjab.

Following the second 'commandment', Ranjit Singh never sat upon a throne but held his durbar sitting cross-legged on a chair. He never added any royal emblem to his turban or attire. He used to tell his courtiers, "I am a farmer and a soldier, and do not care for external pomp. My sword is enough to win for me all the distinction I need."

Humility & Grandeur: He had a keen sense of delight in beauty, colour and gaiety in his surroundings. His courtiers, counsellors and military officers were among the best-looking and most magnificently dressed men of their time. It is doubtful if any court in Europe possessed such a grandeur as the court of *Sarkar-i-Khalsa* in Lahore.

Fakir Azizuddin attributed Ranjit Singh's lack of interest in his looks and dress to an utter lack of personal vanity and humble acceptance of a disadvantage which it had pleased God to inflict on him. He had a deeply pitted face, a blind eye and a diminutive figure and he wasted no time or money on trying to improve it. Fakir Azizuddin also endorses the well-known exchange of remarks between Ranjit Singh and Akali Phula Singh, the Nihang Chief and Jathedar of Akal Takht. One day, while the Maharaja was passing under Phula Singh's balcony riding on an elephant, the Jathedar shouted down at him, "O you one-eyed man, who gave you that he-buffalo to ride on?" Ranjit Singh looked up and said with mock humility, "Your honour, it is a gift from you." Akali Phula Singh represented *Khalsa Sarkar* and Maharaja Ranjit Singh considered himself a humble servant (*sevadhar*) only.

Ominous Silence: Historians have not done justice to the stellar role played by Rani Sada Kaur and *Sarbat Khalsa* in building up the foundations of Sikh Empire ruled by Ranjit Singh. Shah Zaman, the Afghan ruler marched into India on June 1799 at the head of 30,000 men and plundered Punjab. All the Sikh chiefs were afraid to fight with the Afghans. Sada Kaur called the *Sarbat Khalsa* on behalf of Ranjit Singh at Amritsar and threw a challenge to Sikh *misaldars*, "Khalsa Jee, if you fail to summon courage to fight, I shall die fighting to save the honour of Punjab."

Thus, Ranjit Singh was chosen to command the defending army at the young age of 19 at the bidding of Sada Kaur. He laid the siege of Lahore fort, rode upto Samman Burj and challenged Shah Zaman to single combat. Demoralised and defeated, Shah Zaman returned to Kabul and Ranjit Singh became the acknowledged leader of the Sikhs. Sada Kaur was not only the mother-in-law of Ranjit Singh but she also guided his destiny and helped him to build the Sikh Empire in Punjab. In later years, she felt ignored and nursed a grudge against Ranjit Singh. She was even 'imprisoned' and put under house arrest in Lahore and was allowed to return to her estate in Batala only when she signed the ownership deed in favour of Prince Sher Singh, her grand-son and the second son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

The Maharaja's fascination towards horses was matched only by his love for wine, aphrodisiacs and pretty women. His *harem* comprised forty-six women of four categories, nine of whom he married in the orthodox Sikh manner, another nine, all of them rich widows, whom he adopted as wives by casting his mantle (*Chadar*) over them, seven courtesans, mostly Muslim dancing girls, and the rest consisted of concubines. Fakir Nuruddin, the Home Minister, was also incharge of Maharaja's palaces and the *harem*. Due allowance being made for his reticence, it is remarkable that there exists hardly any account or mention of any scandals. The size of his harem was much smaller than the average monarch of Oriental History.

Ranjit Singh conducted an expedition against Raja Sansar Chand of Kangra, especially to marry his two daughters, Guddan and Raj Banso, known for their beauty and good looks. Ranjit Singh's favourite queen, however, was Moran, a dancing girl of Amritsar, with whom he fell

violently in love at first sight when he was just twenty-two. Ranjit Singh accepted all conditions of Moran's father to marry her as per custom of the courtesan's family.

After this marriage, Akali Phula Singh reprimanded Maharaja Ranjit Singh and he presented himself at Akal Takht to receive the '*tankhah*' imposed by the *Jathedar*, by baring his back to receive the lashes.

The Maharaja was fond of spending his - rare - hours of relaxation in singing and dancing soirees in the presence of his courtiers and guests. He would drink his special wine, an extract of raisins with ground pearls mixed in it, at these soirees. The court dancing was provided by a royal troupe consisting of a hundred and twenty five girls chosen for their good looks from all over the Maharaja's domains. The *prima donna* of this royal troupe was Bashiran, whom the Maharaja used to call 'Billo' for her brown eyes.

Glowing tributes have been paid by Fakir Wahid-ud-Din in his book, "*The Real Ranjit Singh*" to the Lion of Punjab. It is a personal account of Maharaja's rule of justice, his secular politics, his conquests and empire building and his shrewd relations with the British. However, the chronicle fails to determine the causes of the fall of Sikh Empire within a decade of Maharaja's death.

