



Secularism in 19th-Century India A Study of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Governance

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Abstract: Maharaja Ranjit Singh, a renowned leader in Indian history, left an indelible mark on the Punjab region through his exceptional military prowess, diplomatic skills, and benevolent governance. As the founder of the Sikh Empire, he unified the region's disparate populations under a cohesive system, leveraging his strength of personality to establish a stable and effective administration. His commitment to secularism was evident in his inclusive approach, where individuals from diverse communities and faiths were appointed to high-ranking positions based on merit. Ranjit Singh's reign exemplified a secular ethos, with the state treating all faiths equally and promoting social harmony. He demonstrated profound respect for diverse faiths, visiting temples, mosques, and gurdwaras with equal devotion, and participating in worship services. His patronage extended to granting jagirs to numerous temples and mosques, and he engaged in philanthropic endeavors, including the renovation of the tomb of Data Ganj Bakhsh and donations to prominent temples. Ranjit Singh's legacy is characterized by his ability to transcend sectarian boundaries, inspiring devotion and loyalty among his diverse subjects. His commitment to justice, compassion, and inclusivity earned him a revered place in history, symbolizing a golden era of tolerance, unity, and prosperity in the Punjab region.

Keyword:- Secularism, Leadership, Spiritual, Simplicity, Harmonious.

INTRODUCTION

Maharaja Ranjit Singh occupies a distinguished place in Indian history, revered as the Sher-e-Punjab (Lion of Punjab), a testament to his enduring legacy as a source of inspiration and pride for successive generations of Indians. As a multifaceted leader, he excelled as a warrior, displaying exceptional martial prowess, while also demonstrating astute diplomatic skills, administrative acumen, and benevolent leadership. Amidst a period of turmoil in Punjab, Ranjit Singh unified the region's disparate populations under a cohesive and structured system of governance, leveraging the strength of his personality to establish a stable and effective administration.¹ However, it is the secular aspect of his personality that truly sets him apart as a monarch, distinguishing him from his contemporaries and underscoring his commitment to inclusivity and tolerance.

The concept of secularism entails the separation of religion from the state, ensuring equal treatment of all faiths and precluding any special status for a particular religion. This framework enables government decisions to be guided by reason rather than religious dogma, thereby promoting social harmony and equality. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign exemplified this secular ethos, as he governed his subjects with an egalitarian approach, transcending religious and creedal differences. Under his visionary leadership, the state of Punjab was transformed into a robust, secular, and well-protected entity, characterized by an era of unprecedented happiness and prosperity. The

Maharaja's benevolent nature, valor, and genuine concern for his people's welfare earned him legendary status during his lifetime, as his administration prioritized the well-being of all citizens, regardless of their faith or background.

The 18th century in Punjab was marked by the decline of Mughal authority, as the Lahore governors progressively lost power and influence.² The disintegration of the Mughal Empire, coupled with the repeated invasions of Ahmad Shah Abdali, created a state of chaos and instability in the region. Amidst this turmoil, ambitious Sikh chiefs capitalized on the power vacuum and established various principalities, ultimately ousting the Mughal governors of Sirhind and Lahore by 1764. This marked the beginning of the Misal period, during which numerous small Sikh states, or misls, emerged. When Ranjit Singh rose to power, the Punjab landscape was characterized by a multitude of fragmented states, including 12 Sikh misls, 7 Muslim states, and 1 Hindu state, alongside several smaller principalities. However, most of these powers were relatively weak, setting the stage for Ranjit Singh's eventual consolidation of power.³

The Punjab region was in a state of turmoil when Maharaja Ranjit Singh ascended to power, with chaos and confusion prevailing throughout the land. This period is often regarded as one of the darkest in Punjab's history. Born on November 30, 1780, Ranjit Singh's arrival coincided with his father Maha Singh's conquest of the Rasoolgarh fort. Initially named Budh Singh by the family priest, Maha Singh renamed him Ranjit Singh, meaning "Conqueror of the battlefield," to commemorate his victory.⁴ Ranjit Singh would go on to become one of the most remarkable rulers in Indian history, renowned for his exceptional military leadership, diplomatic prowess, and administrative acumen. He unified the Punjab region, bringing together disparate communities and petty principalities that had been embroiled in conflict. Starting from humble beginnings as the leader of the Sukerchakia Misal, Ranjit Singh rapidly rose to prominence, occupying Lahore in 1799, assuming the title of Maharaja, and establishing his own mint.⁵ Recognizing the importance of garnering support from the non-Sikh majority, Ranjit Singh adopted a liberal and magnanimous policy towards them, understanding that their backing was crucial to establishing a powerful and stable kingdom.

Ranjit Singh's ascension to power marked a significant transformation from a petty chieftom to the ruler of a vast and powerful state, encompassing territories from the Sutlej to Kashmir, Peshawar, and the Deras, and extending to Leh, Iskardo, and the Khyber region. Proclaimed as Maharaja in 1801, he established a kingdom characterized by liberal, merciful, judicious, and compassionate governance, devoid of distinctions based on religion, caste, color, or creed.⁶ Ranjit Singh's leadership was marked by a commitment to protecting the city and its citizens, with strict orders to his troops to refrain from plunder and ill-treatment. The foundation of his power was rooted in secularism, which enabled him to build a strong and well-protected state. He demonstrated a pragmatic approach to governance, entrusting important offices to individuals from diverse religious backgrounds, both in civil and military affairs.⁷ The symbolism on his war banners, featuring Durga and the solar disc, reflects the complex interplay between religious belief and secularism in his army, which comprised soldiers from various faiths, including Hindus. This eclecticism was in line with Sikhism's principles of respecting all religions, underscoring Ranjit Singh's commitment to inclusivity and tolerance.⁸

Upon assuming the title of Maharaja of Punjab, Ranjit Singh fostered an environment conducive to the flourishing of the region's cultural life. By establishing peace and harmony, he eliminated the threat of foreign invasions and internal chaos, thereby creating a stable foundation for cultural development, artistic expression, and industrial growth. Ranjit Singh's leadership was marked by a policy of religious tolerance, where individuals from diverse faiths, including Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, were appointed to high-ranking positions. This ecumenical approach extended to the arts, where craftsmen and artists of various religious backgrounds collaborated on projects,

exemplified by the creation of the Sikh Maharaja's throne by a Muslim artisan and the involvement of artisans from multiple faiths in the construction of the Golden Temple.⁹ The Maharaja's patronage of diverse communities and faiths enabled Sikh art to transcend rigid boundaries, resulting in a rich cultural heritage characterized by varied themes, inspirations, styles, and techniques. The artistic landscape of Ranjit Singh's court was influenced by Mughal and Iranian traditions, as well as multiple religious traditions, including Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism. The Maharaja's court attracted artists from various denominations, and the artistic centers of Lahore, Amritsar, Srinagar, and others within the Sikh empire thrived under his patronage.¹⁰ By promoting unity and cooperation among diverse communities, Ranjit Singh achieved a significant degree of success in building a cohesive state that drew upon the loyalty and support of its subjects.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh demonstrated a profound respect for diverse faiths, while remaining committed to the tenets of his own. He visited temples, mosques, and gurdwaras with equal devotion, and participated in worship services at these sites. His patronage extended to granting jagirs (land revenue assignments) to numerous temples and mosques, confirming existing grants and bestowing new ones. Ranjit Singh also engaged in philanthropic endeavors, organizing seva (voluntary labor) for the renovation of the tomb of Data Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore and making donations for the memorial of Hazrat Mian Mir. Additionally, he donated gold to prominent temples, including those at Kangra, Jwalamukhi, and the Vishwanath temple in Varanasi.¹¹ According to records maintained by the Punjab Government, the Maharaja's annual expenditure on charitable donations to various religious sites was estimated to be around 12 lakhs rupees. Furthermore, jagirs were allocated for the maintenance of mosques, temples, and gurdwaras, underscoring Ranjit Singh's commitment to supporting diverse faiths and promoting interfaith harmony.

According to Syed Wahiduddin: "Even though the ruler of the state was a Sikh, its administration was in the hands of as able council in which people of all faiths were represented. Even though the basis of Ranjit Singh's rule was religious, in practice it was wholly secular." 20

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's patronage extended to scholars and clergy of various faiths, with pandits, sheikhs, and maulvis receiving stipends for their livelihood. The Maharaja and his family actively participated in religious festivals of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, demonstrating a remarkable level of interfaith engagement. Ranjit Singh joined in the celebrations of Id-ul-Fitr alongside the princes, while the prince distributed niaz (offerings) during Muharram, showcasing a deep understanding and respect for Muslim traditions. This inclusive approach not only fostered an atmosphere of religious tolerance among his subjects but also contributed to his widespread popularity. Notably, whenever the Maharaja embarked on a new venture, military campaign, or faced illness, prayers were offered for his well-being and prosperity in temples, mosques, and gurdwaras, underscoring the deep reverence and affection he enjoyed across different faith communities. This phenomenon highlights the Maharaja's ability to transcend sectarian boundaries and inspire devotion and loyalty among his diverse subjects.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's administration was characterized by a remarkable diversity of officials, drawn from various religious backgrounds and geographical locations, including England, France, Italy, and America. The Maharaja's selection process transcended racial and religious boundaries, as he chose talented individuals from among Sikhs, Hindus, Kashmiri Pandits, Rajputs, Muslims, and Europeans. Some of his most trusted officers included Fazir Aziz-ud-din, Faqir Nuruddin, Diwan Mohkam Chand, Diwan Bhanani Dass, and Bhai Ram Singh, among others. Ranjit Singh's merit-based approach to appointments was notable, as he recognized talent and potential in individuals regardless of their social status. The Maharaja's own words, "God intended me to look upon all religions with one eye, that is why he took away my right eye," reflected his commitment to impartiality and inclusivity.¹² In the civil administration, the country was divided into subahs, parganas, ta'aluqas, and mauzas, with officials from diverse communities appointed to these positions based on their suitability and ability. The administration followed the Mughal pattern, with Persian terminology and language continuing to be used in the

court. A dedicated finance department, Daftar-i-maliyat, was established as the administration evolved, underscoring the Maharaja's commitment to effective governance.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's leadership was marked by a concerted effort to foster harmony among the diverse communities within his state, reconciling their often-opposing interests and safeguarding their legitimate concerns. Throughout his 40-year reign, from 1799 to 1839, he built a vast and strong empire characterized by efficient civil and military administration grounded in secular traditions. The Maharaja's court reflected the multi-ethnic and multicultural diversity of the Punjab's 14-15 million inhabitants, with representation from various communities, including prominent members of each faith. To facilitate communication and governance, Persian was adopted as the court language, while Punjabi was used in contexts where it was revered, such as in relation to the Holy Granth. Ranjit Singh promoted education without discrimination, encouraging his princes to learn foreign languages and supporting the translation of classical works into Punjabi. His patronage of scholars and learning was liberal and inclusive, extending to individuals from all faiths. The Maharaja's efforts to translate sacred texts, including the Bhagwat Gita into Persian and Punjabi, as well as Muslim religious texts into local languages, exemplified his commitment to interfaith understanding and cultural enrichment. This approach cultivated a sense of belonging among his subjects, embodying the spirit of Punjabiya, or Punjabi culture, and fostering an era of goodwill and perfect religious amity among Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians.¹³ Despite being illiterate due to a lack of early education, Ranjit Singh recognized the importance of learning and provided generous support to scholars, demonstrating his dedication to the advancement of knowledge and cultural development.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh demonstrated a profound respect for the religious sentiments of other religions, rivaling his devotion to his own faith. His policy of treating subjects of all faiths equally earned him the respect and affection of his diverse population.¹⁴ The Maharaja's broad religious outlook was reflected in his reverence for all faiths, and his administration was marked by a notable absence of communal fanaticism, forced conversions, and sectarian violence. Strict instructions were issued to his officers to ensure the dignity and safety of women, as well as the respect and protection of sacred texts and holy books of all religions. Capital punishment was abolished, and instances of bribery and corruption were rare. Notably, during his reign, no individual was sentenced to death, underscoring the Maharaja's commitment to justice and compassion. This enlightened approach to governance was acknowledged by Jawaharlal Nehru in his book, *The Discovery of India*, highlighting the Maharaja's remarkable ability to foster an era of peace, tolerance, and coexistence among his subjects.

“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.”¹⁵ The judiciary system under Maharaja Ranjit Singh was characterized by impartiality and non-discrimination, ensuring that justice was administered without bias. The Maharaja prioritized speedy justice, often dispensing verdicts promptly without undue delay. Notably, he was accessible to his subjects, frequently listening to their grievances while passing through streets and resolving cases on the spot. This approach not only reflected his commitment to justice but also underscored his dedication to being a ruler who was approachable and accountable to his people.

It is evident that Maharaja Ranjit Singh's governance was characterized by an inclusive approach, where opportunities in civil and military administration were extended to individuals from diverse communities based on merit, ability, culture, and education. Despite being a Sikh himself, the Maharaja held a deep respect for other faiths and lavished patronage on religious institutions and places belonging to various communities, bestowing grants and jagirs without discrimination. His Muslim wives enjoyed complete freedom to practice their faith, and he actively encouraged interfaith participation, with his wives joining in each other's ceremonials and festivals.

This secular approach fostered a sense of community and cooperation among his subjects, with Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims participating in each other's festivals and celebrations. The Maharaja's inclusive policies earned him the reverence of his subjects, who remembered him in their prayers on significant occasions, including military campaigns, victories, and times of illness. This widespread affection and respect underscore the Maharaja's remarkable ability to transcend communal boundaries and unite his diverse population.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's governance was characterized by a profound commitment to secularism, reflecting the teachings and traditions of the Sikh Gurus. Despite the Sikh community's pivotal role in liberating the land from Mughal and Durrani rule, the Maharaja's government was inclusive, sharing power and resources with Muslims and Hindus alike. The Sikh faith, with its emphasis on secular elements, such as langar (free kitchens) that served people of all backgrounds, inspired the Maharaja's approach.¹⁶ In his secular state, spiritual affairs were separate from temporal ones, and he ensured that Muslim mosques continued to receive state support. The Maharaja's respect for the majority Muslim community was evident in his visit to the Shahi mosque in Lahore, a gesture of goodwill and inclusivity. By regarding himself as a common ruler for Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, Maharaja Ranjit Singh created a unique polity that reconciled and protected the diverse interests of its subjects. His efforts to bring people together, despite their differences, resulted in the creation of a national state of the Punjabis, united by shared political and economic interests, and strengthened by geographical conditions. This secularized state, though Sikh in name, was a testament to the Maharaja's vision of a harmonious and inclusive society.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a pioneering figure in the Punjab, renowned for his exceptional tolerance and broad nationalistic views, which were uncommon in an era marked by religious bigotry. Establishing a secular state in such a context was a remarkable achievement, demonstrating the Maharaja's large-heartedness and broad-mindedness. These qualities not only earned him immense popularity among his subjects but also fostered loyalty among those who had previously been adversaries due to differences in creed. The Maharaja's governance was characterized by efforts to reconcile the divergent interests of all communities, giving his rule a distinctly national appearance.¹⁷ Despite being devoted to the Khalsa, Ranjit Singh was neither a religious fanatic nor a zealot; instead, his devotion was all-encompassing and inclusive. His humility and broad-mindedness made him accessible and beloved by his people, and his legacy endured long after his passing in 1839, earning him a revered place in history. As a true Indian and committed secularist, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's impact on the Punjab region remains profound, symbolizing a golden era of tolerance, unity, and prosperity.

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