

**Grade: 7**

**Course: Virṣā (ਵਿਰਸਾ)**

**Lesson Number: 20**

**Unit Name: Sardār Raṇjīt Singh (ਸਰਦਾਰ ਰਣਜੀਤ ਸਿੰਘ)**

**Title: A Critical Analysis of the the Character of Sardār Raṇjīt Singh**

### **Standards**

#### **Standard 4: The Kingdom of Raṇjīt Singh**

- Students describe the place of Sardār Raṇjīt Singh in Sikh (ਸਿੱਖ) history, as Sikhs understand him.
  - Students will learn about the reign of Sardār Raṇjīt Singh through a critical appraisal.
  - Students will be able to use the lens of Gurbāṇī (ਗੁਰਬਾਣੀ) to understand his attributes and failings.

### **Objectives**

1. Students will learn about Sardār Raṇjīt Singh as an individual in history.
2. Students will learn what impact Sardār Raṇjīt Singh's reign had on Sikhī (ਸਿੱਖੀ).

### **Prerequisites**

- An understanding of the *Misal* (ਮਿਸਲ) period in Sikh history.
- Note: The term *Mahārājā* (ਮਹਾਰਾਜਾ) is commonly used to address Raṇjīt Singh in history and in common parlance. For the purpose of this lesson and in the standard we are addressing him as Sardār as he had himself proclaimed the official title of *Mahārājā*.

### **Materials**

- Blackboard or chart paper
- Articles on Sardār Raṇjīt Singh (in Teacher Resources)

### **Advanced Preparation**

- Teacher should be familiar with the Raṇjīt Singh period in Sikh history (resources and bibliography attached).

### **Engagement (15-20 minutes)**

- Greet students and give them a couple of minutes to settle down and take out their notebooks.
- To introduce the topic, write down “Sardār Raṇjīt Singh” in the center of the blackboard or chart paper.
- Ask students, “What do you know about Raṇjīt Singh based on what you have been told by your parents or other elders, or from your own general knowledge?”
- As students respond, write their answers around the heading on the board or on chart paper. Include all answers even if some of the responses are misinformed.

### **Exploration (35 minutes)**

- Ask them to make a chart in their notebooks. The chart should be entitled “The Character of Sardār Raṇjīt Singh” and should have two columns. One column should be labeled “Attributes” and the other column should be labeled “Weaknesses”.
- Give students the article entitled “Mahārājā Raṇjīt Singh Who Ruled His People's Hearts” and the article entitled “The Failings of Raṇjīt Singh”. One article depicts Raṇjīt Singh in a positive light while the other points out his shortcomings in terms of his character as well as

- his impact on Sikhī. (Both articles are included in Teacher Resources)
- Ask students to read both articles carefully and make notes about Raṇjīt Singh from both articles based on the labels in their charts, placing the information in the appropriate columns.

**Explanation/ Extension (5-10 minutes)**

- Twenty minutes before class ends, get them to look at what they said about Raṇjīt Singh at the beginning of the class. Ask students if they want to erase anything they said earlier or wish to add anything new.
- Ask students, “How is Raṇjīt Singh popularly perceived by Sikhs? Are there any misconceptions about Raṇjīt Singh in the minds of the Sikh people? Why do these misconceptions exist?”
- Discuss with students that while Raṇjīt Singh did create a Sikh Rāj (ਰਾਜ) it was mainly for the purposes of his own pleasure and not necessarily for the good of the people or to give them their rights.
- He headed toward despotism: a government or political system in which the ruler exercised absolute power.
- He undermined the representative system establish by the Gurū Sāhibs in 1805 by stopping Sarbat Khālsā.

**Evaluation (On-going)**

- Ask students to write a balanced and historically accurate perspective on Raṇjīt Singh based on what they have learned so far. Does Raṇjīt Singh represent the ideal Sikh leader according to the principles of Gurmat (ਗੁਰਮਤ)? How did his reign positively and negatively affect Sikhī?

### **Teacher Resources**

- Cunningham, J.D. History of the Sikhs. Ammritsar: Satvic Books, 2002. pp 157-160
- Singh, Saugat. The Sikhs in History. New Dillī: Uncommon Books, 1999. pp 115 - 121
- Khullar, K.K. Mahārājā Ranjīt Singh Who Ruled His People's Hearts. Punjabilok, Dec 25, 2006. [http://www.punjabilok.com/misc/freedom/ranjit\\_Singh 1.htm](http://www.punjabilok.com/misc/freedom/ranjit_Singh 1.htm)

#### **Sardār Ranjīt Singh (ਸਰਦਾਰ ਰਣਜੀਤ ਸਿੰਘ), who ruled his people's hearts**

During my visit to Pakistan, in 1983, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the people there regarded Ranjīt Singh as “their” king in whose reign Pañjāb (ਪੰਜਾਬ) regained its lost glory. The guide at Lāhaur (ਲਾਹੌਰ) Fort described Ranjīt Singh as the bravest and the most benevolent king of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He said that the Pañjāb peasantry still remembered the king in whose rule the strong were just and the weak secure. A book entitled “The Real Ranjīt Singh” by a Pākistānī historian, Sayad Fakīr Vāhedudīn (ਸਯਦ ਫਕੀਰ ਵਾਹੇਦੁਦੀਨ), the great grandson of Fakīr Azīzudīn (ਫਕੀਰ ਅਜੀਜ਼ੁਦੀਨ), Ranjīt Singh's Foreign Minister, brings out the political character of Ranjīt Singh, giving very intimate facts based on family records and archives. According to the book Ranjīt Singh is fondly remembered by one and all, not only by people who once lived there but also by those who still reside there. Even during his conquests he was regarded more as a liberator than a conqueror, as at Peshāvar (ਪੇਸ਼ਾਵਰ), Multān (ਮੁਲਤਾਨ) or Kashmīr (ਕਸ਼ਮੀਰ). Wherever the soldiers of Ranjīt Singh went they were treated as friends, not foes. Ranjīt Singh's standing orders to his armies were that during their movement, no religious place, no religious book, no place of learning, no standing crop was to be destroyed and no woman dishonoured.

Capital punishment was abolished. “Never was so large an empire built with so little criminality”, says Henry T. Prinsep. Ranjīt Singh is not known to have taken anybody's life although his own life was attempted at more than once. His special care for the *Kisān* (ਕਿਸਾਨ) (farmer) and the *Javān* (ਜਵਾਨ) (soldier) made Pañjāb a very liveable place. The result was that people from Dillī, UP and Rājsthān (ਰਾਜਸਥਾਨ) came and settled in Pañjāb. George Keene, a very keen observer of the Pañjāb scene, states: “In hundreds and in thousands the orderly crowds stream on. Not a bough is broken of a wayside tree, not a rude remark to a woman”. Writing sixty years after Ranjīt Singh's death, Griffin said: “His name is a household word in the province. His portrait is preserved in the castle and in the cottage alike.” Jacquemont, the French botanist who came from Paris to Pañjāb in search of roses and who met Ranjīt Singh, said, “His conversation is a nightmare. He passes from one subject to another with the speed of a tornado. He remembers by heart the names of all the villages of his empire, the village heads, the cash crops, the flora and the fauna.” He was a modern mind unfettered by nationalities, religion and faiths, an internationalist who looked much beyond his frontiers.

The French visitor called Ranjīt Singh “the first inquisitive Indian” who completely identified himself with the joys and sorrows of his people. Magnanimous to the fallen foe and generous to the injured and the insulted, Ranjīt Singh was the last Indian king in whose reign the common man felt real freedom. The repartee and the freedom of speech that existed in the court of Ranjīt Singh could be the envy of any parliamentary forum.

Ranjīt Singh was one of those rare rulers who remained humane even on the battlefield. He possessed an informal yet disciplined mind, with a hilarious yet an equable temperament, humorous yet not given to levity. A man of unusual presence of mind and exceptional balance, he could surprise even the wittiest Westerner. When Dr. Joseph Wolffe asked the Pañjāb ruler what was the easiest way to reach God, the shrewd king replied: “By immediately concluding an alliance with the East India Company!” His retorts were gentle, his humour pungent. A son of the soil, his humour was an integral part of the Pañjābī character. Like all Pañjābīs, he loved the banter and burlesque, yet

suffered no fools.

When his Muslim wife, formerly a courtesan, asked him where he was when the God Almighty was distributing beauty, the Raṇjīt Singh twinkled his only eye and said: “I had gone in search of a kingdom.” And what a great kingdom he established. During his 40-year rule there was not a single communal riot in his kingdom, no forced conversion, no second-class citizenry, no disrespect to a shrine or a mosque. On the other hand he donated several mounds of gold for the Vishvanāth (ਵਿਸ਼ਵਨਾਥ) Temple at Banāras (ਬਨਾਰਸ) and Sarasvatī Mandir (ਸਰਸਵਤੀ ਮੰਦਿਰ) at Kurukshetra (ਕੁਰੁਕਸ਼ੇਤ੍ਰ). He gave liberal grants to mosques and the Madrasās (ਮਦਰਸਾ) (Muslim schools). He was a far-sighted man who made many Pañjābīs learn English. He established the first printing press in Gurmukhī (Pañjābīs language script) at Lāhaur. He respected talent and asked the Pañjābīs traders to go abroad and trade with other nations. He, thus, freed Pañjāb from the slavery of eight centuries, brought peace and prosperity to the land of five rivers. The ravaged fields smiled once again, Pañjāb once again became the cherished “golden sparrow”.

Raṇjīt Singh had a tender heart. He released the young cub, which he had caged with care. Asked why, he said: “The lioness, the cub’s mother, had been crying and wailing throughout the night. I could not bear the cries of a mother.” Nobody could shoot a sailing swan or hurt a singing nightingale. With the onset of Monsoon he would order a 102-gun salute to the rising moon. No king anywhere had done it before or ever since.

The Indian Prince of Haidrābād (ਹੈਦਰਾਬਾਦ), the Nizām (ਨਿਜ਼ਾਮ), extended his hand of friendship to him and sent enormous gifts. The Kings of Nepāl, Burmā, the Czar of Russia and the Emperor of France wanted their embassies to be established at Lāhaur. When Fakīr Azīzudīn, Raṇjīt Singh emissary, was asked by Lord Auckland at Simlā (ਸਿਮਲਾ) which of the Raṇjīt Singh’s eyes was missing”, he replied: “The Raṇjīt Singh is like the Sun. The Sun has only one eye. The splendour and the luminosity of his single eye is so much that I have never dared to look at the other eye!” Lord Auckland was so pleased with the reply that he gave his wristwatch to Raṇjīt Singh’s emissary as a present.

No wonder that when he fell seriously ill in the summer of 1839, there were continuous prayers, non-stop recitations in the temples, the mosques and the *Gurduārās* for the recovery of their own Bādshāh (ਬਾਦਸ਼ਾਹ) (King).

On 27<sup>th</sup> June, 1839, he breathed his last. He died 159 years ago. But he is still the ruler of the mind of Pañjāb, nay the whole of India.

*Adapted from: [http://www.punjabilok.com/misc/freedom/ranjit\\_singh1.htm](http://www.punjabilok.com/misc/freedom/ranjit_singh1.htm)*

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*Source: India Perspective*

### **A Critical Analysis of Raṇjīt Singh and His Reign**

The reign of Raṇjīt Singh is popularly considered the Golden Age of Sikh (ਸਿੱਖ) leadership and government. Sardār Raṇjīt Singh is often romanticized as the ideal Sikh leader and his reign is often nostalgically referred to as a peaceful and utopian Khālsā Rāj (ਖਾਲਸਾ ਰਾਜ). In fact, many sources, both scholarly and non-scholarly, are reluctant to mention Raṇjīt Singh’s shortcomings. Instead, these sources dwell upon the non-discriminatory nature of Raṇjīt Singh’s rule and the genius with which he was able to unite the Sikh principalities in Pañjāb. While Raṇjīt Singh was certainly a charismatic and intelligent ruler, he was not an ideal Sikh and his rule was, in fact, less favorable and more damaging to Sikhī (ਸਿੱਖੀ).

The four decades of kingdom under Raṇjīt Singh symbolised the crowning of the Sikh effort to seize power. It was the first time that an indigenous rule was established in the province which put Pañjāb on the map of the world. Raṇjīt Singh achieved his dominance in the Pañjāb through his shrewdness and pragmatism. By the time Raṇjīt Singh came into power, Sikhism had been heavily infiltrated by Brahminism, which separated morality from politics, and there was a lack of centralized leadership amongst the Sikhs. Raṇjīt Singh was able to take advantage of this situation and employed his ruthlessness and ambition in order to gain power in Pañjāb. For instance, he made great use of his mother-in-law, Sadā Kaur's (ਸਦਾ ਕੌਰ) resources in the beginning of his political career and then imprisoned her in 1821.

Raṇjīt Singh's coronation ceremony was presided over by Bābā Sāhib Singh Bedī (ਬਾਬਾ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਸਿੰਘ ਬੇਦੀ) on the Vaisākhī (ਵੈਸਾਖੀ) of 1801. During his reign, Raṇjīt Singh struck coins in Gurū Nānak Sāhib's (ਗੁਰੂ ਨਾਨਕ ਸਾਹਿਬ) name (referred to as the *Nānakshāhī* coins) and abolished the discriminatory tax on Hindus and Sikhs. Raṇjīt Singh also made use of Sikh armed forces such as the *Akālīs* (ਅਕਾਲੀ) and the *Nihāṅgs* (ਨਿਹੰਗ) who constituted the core of his power and helped him to overrun one principality after another. However, his commitment to the faith of his birth was only skin deep and he used Sikhī for tactical purposes. Victor Jacquemont, on a visit to Pañjāb in 1830, "He is a Sikh by profession, a skeptic in reality". Raṇjīt Singh often made vows in the presence of Gurū Granth Sāhib (ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ) and then violated them as suited his needs. In 1802, Raṇjīt Singh subjected himself to the punishment of Akāl Takht (ਅਕਾਲ ਤਖਤ) for his affair with the Muslim dancing girl by publicly baring his back to receive stripes but neither gave up the dancing girls nor his debaucheries even until his death. How far Raṇjīt Singh had strayed from Sikhī can be judged from the fact that his four Hindu wives and seven slave girls committed Satī (ਸਤੀ) on his funeral pyre, a practice that was forbidden by the Sikh Gurūs and absolutely against Sikh traditions. Raṇjīt Singh did make offerings to *Gurduārās*, but this was no extraordinary deed of generosity. If he got the exterior of Harimandar Sāhib (ਹਰਿਮੰਦਰ ਸਾਹਿਬ) plated gold, he made similar donations to the Vishvanāth Temple of Banāras and the Jvālāmukhī (ਜੁਲਾਮੁਖੀ) Temple in Kāngra (ਕਾਂਗੜਾ). Raṇjīt Singh never sought to know what was pure or original Sikhī and he turned a blind eye to the Niraṅkāri (ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰੀ) movement in 1815 which sought to infiltrate Brahminism into Sikh teachings.

Raṇjīt Singh's reign certainly left a lasting impression in Pañjāb but this period of "Sikh" rule was short-lived and contained within itself the seeds of its destruction. Raṇjīt Singh's failure to judge the character of the men that he put in key positions ultimately resulted in the downfall of his kingdom. Raṇjīt Singh placed a great deal of trust in Ḍogrā Rājput Diān Singh (ਡੋਗਰਾ ਰਾਜਪੂਤ ਧਿਆਨ ਸਿੰਘ) and his sons who proved to be treacherous and were instrumental in dismantling Raṇjīt Singh's kingdom after his death. Raṇjīt Singh ultimately caused irreparable damage to Sikhī by his dismantling of the traditional management apparatus at Harimandar Sāhib at Ammritsar. Taking over the management of the *Gurduārās* by the state authorities was destructive to the Sikh values and later paved the way for the British take over and management of these Sikh institutions. In 1805, (Mahārājā) Raṇjīt Singh stopped the gatherings of the Sarbat Khālsā at the Akāl Takht Sāhib.

*Adapted from: Singh, Saṅgat. The Sikhs in History. New Dillī: Uncommon Books, 1999. p 115 - 121*

**“the supremacy of the Akāl Takht”?**

- The Akāl Takht is supreme for the following two reasons:
  - The Gurū Panth announces its decisions from there.
  - The *Jathedār* of Akāl Takht enforces the Gurū Panth’s decisions. While enforcing and implementing these decisions, the Akāl Takht *Jathedār* has the authority to stop their violation by all possible means. Thus, Akāl Takht is only the supreme authority to the extent that it has the power to implement the decisions of the Gurū Panth.

**Is it possible to hold a Sarbat Khālsā in this day and age?**

- This question should encourage discussion amongst class.

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The four decades of kingdom under Ranjīt Singh symbolised the crowning of the Sikh effort to seize power. It was the first time that an indigenous rule was established in the province which put Pañjāb on the map of the world. Ranjīt Singh achieved his dominance in the Pañjāb through his shrewdness and pragmatism. By the time Ranjīt Singh came into power, Sikhism had been heavily infiltrated by