

# **MAHARAJA RANBIR SINGH**

**(1830 - 1885)**

K.M Panikkar in his book “The Founding of The State Kashmir State - A Biography of Maharaja Gulab Singh 1792 – 1858” states that the 18th century had produced men who founded kingdoms and dynasties but this was the only case in 19th century India, of a man beginning as a small official in Sikh court went on to become a legendary warrior and established himself as a sovereign. He is the only ruler in India’s long history that could be said to have extended India's geographical boundaries. No doubt it was Maharaja Gulab Singh who with his exemplary political acumen and personal fortitude founded the state but it was Maharaja Ranbir Singh who during his illustrious reign expanded, united, and consolidated the state set up by his father.

Maharaja Ranbir Singh (1830-1885) after being installed as the Ruler on the throne of Jammu & Kashmir State on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1856 did not change the basic structure of the personal rule that his father, Maharaja Gulab Singh, had adopted in running the administration and gave positive dimensions to his rule. He inherited a government that was disorganized and its economy was in shambles and limping. He wanted to breathe prosperity, and peace and usher an era of reforms for his subjects. As he took over the centre stage of administration, he vigorously crafted policies and potential innovative measures to launch his rule because he wanted to bring out the State from the shackles of poverty and exploitation.

Maharaja Gulab Singh was eager to install Ranbir Singh on the throne of the State during his lifetime because, by 1856, his health had worsened. Confirmation of Ranbir Singh's ascendancy to the throne was required by the British Rulers in India. Gulab Singh's friendly and diplomatic relations, influence, and status with the British officialdom weighed in his favour. At twenty-six Ranbir Singh had sufficient experience and rigorous training under his father to assume the onerous responsibility as a ruler of the largest Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir. He was inspired by the youthful ambitious and impassioned zeal to uplift the socioeconomic status of the State.

Gulab Singh married early in life in 1809 in a Rukwal Rajput family and by his Rani, he had three sons, Udham Singh, Sohan Singh, and Ranbir Singh. Udham Singh died along with Nao Nihal Singh when they were passing under the gateway which gave access to the first slab of stone and masonry crashed down on their heads. Sohan Singh was killed along with Hira Singh and Pandit Jalla on 21<sup>st</sup> December 1844. Ranbir Singh was the third youngest and the only surviving son of Gulab Singh who was entrusted the mantle of Rulership of the State. The year that followed after Ranbir Singh's ascendancy to the prime slot was an extremely turbulent period in Indian history.

Social and economic challenges confronting the State engaged Ranbir Singh's attention. The issues faced by his subjects had to be tackled with innovative measures and diplomatic strategy. During General Zorawar Singh's war campaigns about one hundred and six soldiers of his army had been made captives in Lhasa in December 1841. The Maharaja repatriated them from Lhasa through the good offices of the British resident in Nepal in 1857. Fifty-six of them

opted to return to Jammu and they were honourably settled with Jagirs.

After the arrival of State forces which had been dispatched to help the British suppress the rebellion of 1857, an expedition force was specially raised and trained under the command of Colonel Devi Singh Narania, Colonel Bijai Singh, and General Hoshiara Singh to annex the north-east Tribal areas because Maharaja Gulab Singh was unable to subjugate Gilgit and other tribal areas during his lifetime. There was a rebellion in Gilgit and the tribal Rajas of Yasin, Hunza, and Nagar gave a deadly blow and inflicted heavy casualties on Dogra forces.

Maharaja Gulab Singh laid the foundation of a stable administration in the provinces of Jammu and Kashmir, but the credit of reconquering Gilgit and the subjugation of Hunza and Nagar, Ponial and Yasin went to Maharaja Ranbir Singh. He organized regular campaigns to which almost every Dogra family contributed a soldier in 1860 under the command of Colonel Devi Singh Dogra troops inflicted a crushing defeat on the recalcitrant Rajas of the frontier areas and avenged the earlier Dogra defeat<sup>288</sup>. The force under the command of Col. Bijai Singh and Hoshiara Singh crossed the Sindh River from Punji and made a brisk advance towards Gilgit. Before this force could reach its target to capture it, the ruler of Gilgit, Gaur Aman, died. The demoralized small force of the deceased ruler was not a match for the Dogra force. The Dogra's captured the Gilgit with little resistance from the enemy. Colonel Devi Singh marched towards Yasin without contending with this victory over Gilgit. The Dogra troops besieged the Mandori fort of Yasin and Maharaja Ranbir Singh celebrated this victory over Yasin and awards were distributed among his officers.

In 1866 another campaign was launched against Hunza under the overall command of Colonel Bijai Singh. Forces of Yasin, Chitral, Darel, Hunza, and Nagar formed a united front against the onslaught of Dogra forces. Maharaja's forces crossed the Sindh River at Bunji but before the offensive was to be struck, the united front collapsed. Aman Malik fled away with his troops towards Chitral and his allies also ran away from the battlefield and Ponial was captured with little resistance. Subsequently, the Dogra forces besieged Darel and the head of Darel accepted the Maharaja's supremacy and agreed to pay him a tribute.

Maharaja Ranbir Singh established the Justice Department and regular courts came into being during his reign. For the smooth running of this department, criminal and civil laws were formulated and later on consolidated into Ranbir Dandh Bidhi or Ranbir Penal Code which are in practice till today and form part of the State constitution. He made Justice prompt, cheaper, and regular because the people's faith in the prevailing judicial system had waned due to the tardy disposal of justice. He handed over the judicial department to executive officials and he made himself available to the generality of his subjects. The Maharaja held two Durbars a day where all petitions were received and heard. Petitions were dictated by the Maharaja to the Munshi who read them in the Durbar. For political prisoners and rebels, separate cells were constructed in jails and for those convicted of life imprisonment, forts were built in the far-flung frontier areas. Food and dresses of the prisoners were decided and arrangements for them were made systematically.

He introduced the postal and telecommunication services in the State and in 1877, a telegraph service was extended from Sialkot to Jammu and Kashmir. Five years later that is in 1882 services were

further extended to Gilgit and Askardu. In this way, he covered the entire State with a network of postal and telephone services.

Maharaja Ranbir Singh did not interfere in the religious matters of any community and turned his face against discrimination. He treated all communities at par as one entity and infused in them respect for all religions. The Maharaja's unreserved religious tolerance can be made out from this factual incident that the Jama Masjid at Srinagar was thrown open for religious use which was closed during the Sikh Rule in 1820. He went to the extent of constructing a water duct for ablutions in the Mosque and a committee was formed under Khawja Rahim Shah, Gafoor Shah Naqashbandi, and Azim Drabu to collect funds for its repair and Maharaja Bahadur contributed six thousand rupees for this noble cause.

Maharaja Ranbir Singh was a great patron of learning, and knowledge and an ardent lover of architecture who built countless temples, shrines, and *pathshalas*. He wanted to make another Kashi in Jammu by constructing a series of temples from Jammu to Purmandal and Utterbehani. The well-known temples and shrines that he built in Jammu and the surroundings of Jammu are the Raghunath Temple complex at Jammu, Gadadharji and Raghunath Temple at Utterbehani, and Ranbireshwar and Panchvakhtra Temples in Jammu. Ranbireshwar Temple 'built on an imposing edifice on a lofty square platform below which are two-storeyed rooms for pujaris, priests and pilgrims'. It was built under the supervision of Raja Ram Singh and thrown open to the public on *Mahashivratri* in February 1871.

He brought about a revolutionary change in the field of education. Being gifted with a scholarly bent of mind and his focus on the

progress of education was not limited only to the State; he liberally denoted to Sanskrit *Pathshala* at Benaras and established a big Sanskrit *Pathshala* at Kashi. He established the first printing press in the State and the Jammu and Kashmir Gazette' was published for the first time in the Ranbir Printing Press in 1882.

He established a translation department under the aegis of eminent scholars to translate books from Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, and English into Dogri, Urdu, and Hindi. Books in different subjects like Astronomy, Mathematics, Physics, Zoology, and Chemistry were printed in Ranbir Press for free distribution to all scholars of the Government Schools, *Pathshalas*, and Madrassas. He donated one lac of rupees to Punjab University Lahore and when the university started its regular academic sessions in the year 1882, 'the name of Maharaja Ranbir Singh was entered as the First Fellow of Punjab University. All the educational institutes of the State were affiliated to this university.

Maharaja Ranbir Singh was an astute Statesman and a very efficient administrator. Besides his conquest of the frontier areas, he made brisk progress in the administration of the State and imported the cream of intelligence from across India to govern the affairs of the State. He issued guidelines for the smooth functioning of each department so that it could bring prosperity to its people. Jhelum Valley road between Srinagar and Kohala was started during his reign vehicular traffic but it could not be completed during his lifetime. The credit for completing this road from Srinagar to Rawalpindi went to Maharaja Pratap Singh. During his twenty-eight years of his rule, he achieved unparalleled prosperity for his subjects. Maharaja Ranbir Singh breathed his last on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1885 at Jammu.

## **Conclusion**

Maharaja Ranbir Singh was a judicious and liberal-minded Ruler who initiated a plethora of wide-ranging innovative measures for the benefit of his subjects. He through his sincere, sustained, and consistent efforts achieved incredible success for the overall development of the State and morphed the socio-economic conditions of his subjects during his rulership. He would be acknowledged as the most popular ruler who was conscious of his duties and obligations towards his subjects. He improved the status of his administration with dedication and lofty ideals of service.

During his twenty-eight years of rule, he achieved unparalleled prosperity for his subjects, he remained unruffled and unfazed, successfully foiled all British strategies to impose the Resident in the State, and throughout his rule maintained complete and unrestricted independence in internal matters and gave to Jammu and Kashmir an enviable political identity.