

# GURU NANAK AND MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH - The Unlikely Connection

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## ABSTRACT

Maharaja Ranjit Singh - the *Sheré Punjab* – the sole individual who was able to unite the Sikh Empire into a unified entity which rivaled that of the great British empire. He considered himself to be a devout follower of Sikhism. Was there a connection, if any, between the teachings and philosophies of the Guru Nanak and some of the ideologies of the Maharaja? This paper attempts to create such a connection between the Sikh ruler and the founder of the Sikh faith. Though there is no doubt that both were also in stark contrast to one another (especially when assessing some of Ranjit Singh's mannerisms), both figures in Sikh history shared certain beliefs.

## INTRODUCTION

On the one hand, we have the founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak. And on the other, the founder of the Sikh empire, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. A span of over three hundred years separates these iconic figures in Sikh history, but could there be much more which connects them than many believe? Maharaja Ranjit Singh is synonymously known for being the '*sher*' (Lion) of Punjab because he was solely able to unite the Sikh empire into a nation which rivaled that of the British in addition to being the envy of many other European nations. He built for himself a reputation by creating the great Sikh empire, but what of his reputation as a follower of Sikhism, or more specifically, Guru Nanak? Guru Nanak was the great visionary and mystic who discovered the Sikh faith—was his influence so great that he impacted the philosophies and ideologies of the Maharaja and how he ruled? Certainly, though they may have led vastly different lives, there does exist a few chains of ideologies which connect the founder of the Sikh faith to the founder of the Sikh empire.

## DISCUSSION

### Guru Nanak and Maharaja Ranjit

## Singh

Guru Nanak was born on April 15, 1469 in Talwandi, which is now nearby Lahore, Pakistan. Though he was born into a Hindu, Ksatriya caste family, an epiphany or spiritual enlightenment occurred in 1499, where he came to the realization that there were in fact no religious barriers, and that God existed in all beings. Guru Nanak's teachings and philosophies were simple and true: he preached purity, love, goodness, and the word of God, whom is the only one.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was born in Gujranwala, modern day Pakistan, on November 13, 1780. His father, Maha Singh, was the commander of the Sukerchakir Misl. When Ranjit Singh took over of the misl, he slowly gained conquest of all the misls, thus creating the unified Sikh Empire. Ranjit Singh was officially crowned as the Maharaja of the Sikh Empire on April 12, 1801, in order to coincide with Vaisakhi.

Despite the stark differences between the lives they led, both Guru Nanak and Ranjit Singh share some very significant beliefs which lay the foundation of Sikhism. The first of these philosophies was the belief in the oneness of mankind. It was widely known and believed that Guru Nanak

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expressed the message of equality, namely that:

ਸਭੁ ਕੋ ਉਚਾ ਆਖੀਏ ਨੀਚੁ ਨ ਦੀਸੈ ਕੋਇ ॥  
ਇਕਨੈ ਭਾਂਡੇ ਸਾਜਿਐ ਇਕੁ ਚਾਣੁ ਤਿਹੁ ਲੋਇ ॥

AGGS, M1, p 62 [1]

*Call everyone high, none appears to be low;  
Everyone has been molded from the same matter;  
And the same source of light shines in all."*

(Source: Personal Communication: Prof Devinder Singh Chahal, Institute for Understanding Sikhism)

Such was his appeal that his beliefs and values touched those of both Hindu and Muslim faiths. Nanak's message was very simple when it came to appeasing both Hindus and Muslims- simply that one should live on grounds of humanitarianism, and not so much on the differences in their religion. In attempting to call on Muslims and Hindus, Nanak ultimately hoped to demonstrate that above all, regardless of our different faiths, and sects and castes, the universal truth is the human concept of God. Furthermore, Nanak affirmed that God existed in all of us for "Not only does God live within the human body, but it is only within this body that He manifests himself." [7, p 50]. Thus, regardless of whether we are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, etc., God exists in all of us.

Guru Nanak not only expressed his beliefs in the oneness of mankind, but he physically experienced other religions. During his many travels over the course of thirty years, where he searched religious enlightenment and experience, Nanak saw the places believed to be holy by Hindus and Muslims. Although he did not verbally recite the prayers, he still participated in the Muslim prayers. Guru Nanak also had friends of these different faiths, including Muslim Sufis and saints. As we all know, much of the writing in the Guru Granth has been contributed by Sufis, saints, and religious peoples of many religions other than Sikhi.

Bhai Kesar Singh Chhibber also defined the Guru's philosophy as simple as believing in the "Oneness of God and brotherhood of man." [7, p 59] Much of Nanak's Bani also pays homage to his respect to different faiths as a large number of hymns address Jogis and Siddhas and engages in dialogue with their respective practices.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a devout Sikh. He had his own *Granthi* and spiritual advisor and donated extensively to the Harimandir Sahib including covering the temple with the gold-plated copper sheets as we see it today. In addition, Ranjit Singh would hear daily recitations, as well as seek guidance from the Aad

Guru Granth Sahib, as seen in this very famous grand painting titled "Maharaja Ranjit Singh listening to the Granth being recited near the Golden Temple, Amritsar," done by Schoeft in 1841 in honour of Ranjit Singh, who had died only two years earlier. Though a devout Sikh, he, like Guru Nanak, also had great respect for the Hindu and Muslim faiths, never declaring a bias for his own faith, and thus ruling the empire with such a philosophy. Thus,

"As Maharaja of the Punjab and head of a state with so much ethnic and religious diversity, he showed a remarkable interest in preserving the religious and cultural freedom of his subjects, showing a respect, a curiosity of mind and a sympathetic approach to the feelings and beliefs of others. [2, p 69]

Ranjit Singh made sure that those places of worship for the Muslim community was preserved and protected, and he also freely granted the erecting of Sikh and Hindu temples, "which was a total departure from the policy of the former governments of the land." [2, p 69] Ranjit Singh's closest ally and confidante, as well as being the Prime Minister of the Sikh empire, was the very well known and respected Muslim, Fakir Aziz-ud-Din. It was also known that upon becoming the ruler of Lahore, Ranjit Singh's first act was to pray at the Badshahi Masjid, followed by the giving of grants to the shrines of Jawala Mukhi, Jagannath Puri, Benares, and others. Ranjit Singh also donated gold to the Temple of Jawalamukhi. Portraits during his time also depict Ranjit Singh worshipping Devi and even his military manual includes an image of "Om" with Vishnu, Lakshmi, Brahma and Shiva. A final important way in which Ranjit Singh maintained the presence of Hinduism and Islam within his kingdom was to promote education for each respective community. Of course, Ranjit Singh gave special attention to the formation of Gurmukhi schools, but it was still impressive that "[e]very religious institution had a teaching unit...there was great care, under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, to allow these various institutions, Hindu, Sikh or Muslim, to function properly, disseminating knowledge and transmitting culture...with the help of the state (grants, *jaghirs*) and the freedom guaranteed by the power of the government. Indeed, because of his generous desire to allow religious freedom and knowledge to all his subjects, an estimated 330,000 pupils received education in their respective religion in the Sikh empire. Maharaja Ranjit Singh summed up his philosophy best when asked why he spent Rs. 10,000 for a copy of the Koran, declaring "God intended me to look at all religions with one eye. That is why he took away the light from the other" [2, p 69].

In their own respective ways, both Guru Nanak and Ranjit Singh shared the immense passion for knowledge seeking as well. For Nanak, the quest for knowledge and the quest for truth were one and the same. It was this desire to seek the truth that Nanak engaged in his journeys to learn about others, while at the same time promoting his ideology that we all were one. Thus, "his quest for divine knowledge led him to various centers of religious learning" [2, p 69]. Many of Nanak's writings, including the *Japji*, *Asa-di-Var*, and *Sidh Gosht*, reveal his coming into contact with ascetics and anchorites who taught him various forms of meditation, and with whom he engaged in religious discourse with. During his first journey, Nanak gained knowledge of the various forms of pilgrimages, and came to the conclusion that most were "devoid of any loving adoration" [2, p 69]. Because Nanak saw and felt no differences in humankind, he wandered as far as he could and gained knowledge on the practices, pilgrimages and beliefs of Muslims and Hindus. Throughout the knowledge he gained, Nanak still preached his one prevailing ideology in the oneness of mankind, and the existence of God in all humans.

Ranjit Singh created an incredible system of knowledge and intelligence gathering in his own empire-though for very different purposes than what Guru Nanak hoped to gain. However, Ranjit Singh still understood and embraced the power which knowledge seeking would gain. Ranjit Singh not only was aware of all travelers (especially British) entering and exiting his kingdom, but he was also able to control and gain valuable sources of information from such visitors. There are numerous examples of British travelers who were witness to Ranjit Singh's suspicious and knowledge seeking nature. V. Jacquemont, the French scientist for example, visited Ranjit Singh in 1831 and described the extent of questions he was berated with, saying: "Ranjit questioned me about my travels, asked me when I had last left France and what countries I had since seen, and examined me about their climate, riches, products, power, etc" [3, p 36]. Jacquemont certainly was aware of Ranjit Singh's hospitality as well as his unique enquiring nature as he exclaimed, "His conversation is like a nightmare, he is almost the first inquisitive Indian I have seen...He has asked me a hundred thousand questions about India, the British, Europe, Bonaparte, this world in general and the next, hell, paradise, the soul, God, [and] the devil" [4, p 16]. When W.G. Osborne, the military secretary to the Earl of Auckland visited Ranjit Singh in 1839, he was also bombarded with questions from the Maharaja as he described, "our time was principally occupied in answering Runjeet's innumerable questions, but without the slightest chance of being able to satisfy his insatiable curiosity" [5, p 79]. In addition to his personal desire to gain as much knowledge as possible, as mentioned earlier, Ranjit Singh was able to build such

a formidable empire in part because he encouraged knowledge seeking and the institution of education for Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims equally through the building of schools. These children were "acquainted at the elementary level by their teachers-*maulvis*, *pandit* or *gurus*-with reading, writing, and some method of computation" [2, p 69]. Thus, Ranjit Singh not only had an immense passion for knowledge in order to increase his own power, but he also understood the importance of knowledge and education for his subjects as well.

Another ideology which Guru Nanak and Ranjit Singh shared was an appreciation for the aesthetics. For Guru Nanak, this was in the form of *bhakti*. Not *bhakti* in the sense that followers of Hinduism believed, but *bhakti* through the "self-surrender through love and devotion and its disciplines [of] *simran* and meditation" [7, p 247]. For Guru Nanak, aesthetics and *bhakti* came together in the form of poetry as found in the Gurbani, for he believed that "*bhakti* expresses itself in a life as love, compassion, freedom from fear, freedom from hate, and influence every action of human life. It [was] the source of man's physical and spiritual strength" [7, p 255]. There were three poetic devices which Guru Nanak utilized in his poetry: *rasa*, the bard, and *dhuni*. *Rasa* also included nine types, consisting of: *Shingar Rasa*, *Karun Rasa*, *Nam Rasa*, *Amrit Rasa*, etc. Guru Nanak believed that *Nam Rasa* for example, "quenches the thirst of the soul, [and] also of the body" [7, p 121]. To Guru Nanak, the bard was a messenger of God, who interprets his own personal encounter with the divine, "as if God is speaking through the lips of the poet" [7, p 122]. Finally, *dhuni* was a poetic device which referred to the lines of poetry possessing hidden meanings.

Guru Nanak went beyond the realm of aesthetics into that of the super aesthetics, whereby he conveyed the message through his poetry that Man was divine in origin, the concept that the "real man is in God's own image."

Guru Nanak was the ultimate poet and had a great passion for the aesthetic, extending even to the concept of modern day *kirtan*. He was truly "not only the poet's poet, but also the universal singer" [7, p 126].

Ranjit Singh also shared a passion for the aesthetics-though displayed through different means. The zenith of Ranjit Singh's court could be seen in his lavish public darbars, often held in time of major political events. These darbars were often attended by the highest level officials, each exhibiting their most precious jewelry, attire, etc. For Ranjit Singh however, the darbars were an opportunity for him to exhibit his

passion and taste for the aesthetics, sharing with his guests a number of art forms including: dance, music, craftsmen, in addition to the material aesthetics worn by the high powered guests and officials. Ranjit Singh also had a great relationship with European artisans, most of whom were hired by the court to paint some of the most famous portraits of himself and his court proceedings. Ranjit Singh understood the power of the arts, and held no qualms in immortalizing himself through such an art form. Even in his appreciation for the arts, Ranjit Singh was influenced by the first Sikh Guru, opting to “to involve the sanctions of humanness from the first Master of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak, he seem[ed] to show his aspirations to build the personal myth of a man” [6, p 54]. In other words, through the aesthetic, and with the influence of Guru Nanak in mind, Ranjit Singh also wanted his legacy to reflect a man of the people, and not a mythical being.

The philosophies of Guru Nanak and Ranjit Singh certainly come together in terms of their openness to all religions, their passion for knowledge seeking, as well as their passion for the aesthetics; however, did Ranjit Singh’s connection to Guru Nanak go beyond mere mimicry of beliefs? It could be argued that Ranjit Singh’s deep devotion to Sikhism is what influenced him. However, there is evidence which suggests that he felt a deeper connection to the first Sikh Guru, and thus, was influenced by Guru Nanak specifically. On the day of his coronation for example, on April 12, 1801, it was Baba Singh Bedi, the direct descendant of Guru Nanak, who “daubed Ranjit Singh’s forehead with *tilak* and proclaimed him as the Maharaja of Punjab” [6, p 45]. Following the official ceremonies, one of Ranjit Singh’s first actions as the Maharaja of Punjab was to order new coins to be struck: “These did not bear his effigy or his name but that of Guru Nanak and were named *Nanak Shahi* (of the emperor Nanak) coins” [6, p 47]. Not only was one of Ranjit Singh’s first actions as ruler to credit Nanak, but later on in his reign, he once again ordered coins to be minted (though only samples were made), in which a bowing Maharaja pays his respect to Guru Nanak—suggesting the formers desire to be etched in time alongside the ladder. The influence of Guru Nanak on Ranjit Singh could not be underestimated for it was through his devotion to Nanak, that Ranjit Singh was able to achieve some sort of order amidst so much chaos.

## CONCLUSIONS

When looking at the vastly different life Guru Nanak led, versus the life Ranjit Singh led, it may be difficult to ascertain that the two may have actually shared some key beliefs, or even the great influence that Guru Nanak had on Ranjit Singh; however, this is the actual truth. There is definite merit in the argument that the

founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak, and the founder of the Sikh empire, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, shared some of the most prominent philosophies which the foundations of Sikhi were based on. Of these, the Sikh tradition and belief in the oneness of mankind is the most prominent. Ranjit Singh also lived in a time of stoic cultural, religious, and social restrictions, but because he was so influenced by Guru Nanak’s teachings, he also treated everyone as equals, regardless of their religion or caste—a standard by which no ruler before him had ever exhibited. It is certainly amazing that in preaching both social and spiritual ideologies Guru Nanak was able to influence the way in which Maharaja Ranjit Singh ruled his own Sikh empire, arguably one of the greatest empires formed since the time of the Mughals.

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