

# Maharaja Ranjit Singh reformer for 50 years

It seems to have been during the first half of the eighteenth century that the practice of Akhand Path, the continuous reading of the Holy Granth Sahib, developed. The purpose was to sustain small armies of Sikhs, including their women and children, who were constantly on the move from one refuge to another.

Sikh power grew as Mogul rule weakened, partly because of Afghan-Mogul wars but also because the central government was weakening and the local governors lacked the authority.

By 1765 the Sikhs were able to organize themselves into 12 misals or military groups covering most of the Punjab. Each Baisakhi and Diwali they assembled at Amritsar.

A leader of one of the misals was Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He was born in 1789 and became leader of his small army at age 16, upon the death of his father. In his early years he had a bad attack of smallpox which left its mark on his face and caused the loss of his left eye. But he soon recovered his health and grew up to be a fierce and strong warrior.

His father took him often to the battlefield. He therefore had seen a great deal of battle even as a child. He had no other education and was unable even to sign his name.

When Ranjit Singh was 16, he took control of his father's large estate including its army. Another misal ruled by his mother-in-law soon became his. After acquiring several smaller misals, he became the most powerful ruler. Later after capturing Lahore, the main city of the Punjab, he made Lahore his headquarters.

The city had been governed by three Sikhs who governed so badly the people welcomed Ranjit Singh as a Savior. Soon after this, he took the title Maharaja.

His foes tried to stop him but in 1802 he took the Holy city of Amritsar as well.

As he continued his march though the lesser kingdoms, they turned to the British for help. He



## Indo Canadian

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signed a treaty with the British to keep the peace. Thus Rankit Singh was prevented from bringing all the Sikh states under one head. He had to be satisfied with the land lying to the north and west of the Sutlej River. The friendship of the British, however, was useful in another way. He had no enemy to fear from the east and could thus advance his power in the west. After signing the treaty with the British in 1809, the Maharaja marched upon Kangra and saved it from the Gurkhas only to make it his own. By 1819 he had captured Multar, Kashmir and Peshawar.

He would have taken Sind as well had not the British stopped him. To the last he remained a faithful friend of the British, often sending his forces to fight alongside theirs.

In spite of having some faults as a man, Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a good and able ruler. He revived

the concept of Piri and Miri, the two sword theory of Sikhism. Piri is used to denote a religious leader or Guru. Miri is delivered from the word Amir, meaning commander of the faithful.

Although Ranjit Singh ruled over an independant Punjab, it was not a Sikh state and despite the rulers personal religious beliefs, it should be regarded as a state in which any religion could be expressed freely.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh is remembered today as the lion of the Punjab. His ambition was to unite all Sikhs in a great Sikh nation. The World Book Encyclopedia states the Sikhs fought to achieve a separate kingdom until 1849 when they were conquered by the British and annexed to the rest of British India.

The 50-year period of his rule which brought domestic peace to the Punjab, even though the state was frequently at war, resulted in the building of Gurdwaras and the restoration of such shrines as the Golden Temple.

He trained his army on European lines and made them as fit and strong as any in Europe or Asia. He employed officers both Sikh and non-Sikh without making any distinction between them. He even took Europeans into his service.

He gave high posts to Hindus and Muslims as well as Sikhs. he was very big-hearted and made no distinction between Hindus and Muslims, which added to his popularity. He died in 1839. All people mourned him.