



Research Paper

## The Reign of Maharaja Ranbir Singh and Social Reforms

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The foundation of the modern state of Jammu and Kashmir has been documented and there has been much debate on the role of the Maharaja Gulab Singh and the British and his contribution is well known among the historical circles but the period under his successor Maharaja Ranbir Singh which was the real consolidating era of the Dogra rule hasn't found much writers and has not received sufficient or appropriate recognition and attention. The state which consisted of varying cultural and ethnic entities was amalgamated and unified under the efficient and able of Maharaja Ranbir Singh and his brilliant administration. It also needs to be understood here that all these consolidation measures were being taken in a not so friendly atmosphere as the British were continuously finding ways to pull down the Maharaja and increase their interference in the region as they wanted to check the advance of the Russian intrusion and Jammu and Kashmir was the most strategic location in this regard.

Maharaja Ranbir Singh seems to have been associated with every aspect of reform activities and developmental projects of the erstwhile state. From Temple construction to digging of canals, establishing Darmarath Trust, promoting Sanskrit language, getting Jama Masjid renovated, his contributions governed all the fields and his rule can not be studied just as an administrative reformer, rather his reign was a period of wholesome progress and blooming of the J&K region.

### Reformist Activities

The first and foremost step was seen in changing whatever excess in taxation in administration was prevalent, it was effectively revised under Ranbir Singh's passion for public welfare in every sphere. This zeal found expression in every aspect of the upliftment of the society be it economic, social or religious. It was obviously initiated by reforms in the administrative sphere and subsequently a transformation in the socio-economic domain were brought about. Maharaja Ranbir Singh was a monarch and the age in which he lived was not exactly an enlightened one in the Indian subcontinent but changes had been occurring with respect to social reforms gaining a momentum and it seems that as a monarch Maharaja was forerunner when he brought out a series of reforms and its most visible example is the Ranbir Penal Code. This indeed was a remarkable feat as a monarch who was aware about the changing needs of his people is reflective of the consciousness that Maharaja possessed about his region.

Maharaja Ranbir Singh was a man who had immense pride in his culture and religion and he took various steps preserve it by extending patronage to literary activities. However, this doesn't in any way means that he did not have an inclusive personality. He was responsible for renovation of Jama Masjid and didn't interfere in the religious activities of non Hindus and never indulge in any oppressive measure for propagating his personal faith. It seems that Maharaja Ranbir Singh wanted to ameliorate the entire society of J&K irrespective of any differences in class and faith. He adopted persuasive measures inspired by humanistic values to bring reforms by philanthropic activities like construction of dharmashalas, practicing charity, and giving endowments to serve his subjects.

Being an intellectual himself he took various measures for the literary upliftment and educational development of his subjects by opening a number of school, maktabs, and pathshalas. To serve the purpose of educational upliftment of people he made education free at all the levels and provided stipends along with free

books. Here again the consideration of opening makhtabs for the muslim subjects showcase his benevolent and liberal attitude. Along with the Indian medicine system like ayurveda and unani, western system of medicine was also given due consideration.

### **Cultural Contribution of Maharaja Ranbir Singh**

Maharaja Ranbir Singh's reign is considered as the age of renaissance in the erstwhile state of J&K. Just like the European renaissance which led to the outburst of the literary activities and production of vast literature, and flourishing of languages. Maharaja also took various measure to enhance the literary activities in the states. He even donated various Sanskrit institutions at Benaras and established a pathshala at kashi at his own expense, provided benevolent grants for the establishment of Punjab University at Lahore. All these activities revealed his intellectual bent of mind and importance of culture for him. Further, for the moral upliftment of his subjects, he got compiled Beovahar Gita (code of conduct) and the study of it was made compulsory.

The establishment of pathshalas served the dual purpose of imparting secular education like grammar, science, medicine, logic, etc. and moral education as these pathshalas were made a part of temple complexes like Raghunath temple, Ranbireshwar Temple and Temples at Purmandal and Uttarbehani. Its was probably his keen interest in literature which motivated him to establish such pathshalas and later they emerged as cultural hubs and this was well organised with the establishment of Dharmartha trust.

The presence of various manuscripts of Sanskrit, hindi, dogri, persian, telugu, etc. in his library reflect his love for cultural diversity and heritage. All the literary activities of the state were carried out under his direct supervision. The literary activities involved careful research and selection of manuscripts and there were many manuscripts that were corrected and authenticated under his guidance. Along with the manuscripts, the commentaries on the vedas, the puranas, ganitshastras were also compiled. Under his guidance, original Kashmiri manuscripts were also obtained and utmost care was given to copying these rare works

The other aspects of literary activity undertaken in his reign was the stress laid on the Dogra cultural renaissance by revival of the Dogri script and its popularisation. Dogri was made the medium of exchange and was given the status equal to Persian. Sanskrit texts were compiled in Dogri script instead of Devanagari script. Since the Dogri alphabet was imperfect in its old form, it was brought closer to Devanagari however with some variation. For this purpose of popularisation of Dogri, temple structures again played an important role particularly the Raghunath pathshala.

Dharmarthand its activities was another feather which is attributed to Maharaja Ranbir Singh's cultural activities. Although it was established by Maharaja Gulab Singh, it was regularised by Maharaja Ranbir Singh and he gave it a wholesome shape. From the maintenance of temples to charitable functions, the Dharmarth was extended to the welfare of the society. Here, it needs to be understood that it was reorganised for the spiritual upliftment of the society. Grants were given to the temples which became cultural centres. It has already been pointed out that temple structures were heavily constructed under the Maharaja and they were being used both as educational and religious centres. The organisation of Dharmarth furthered this process and the region became home to multiple renowned temples adding to the already existing Tirthas of the region.

### **Cultural Continuity**

The social reforms and the keen interest that the Maharaja took in the scholarly and research activities has been established and it is rather the most well-known aspect of Maharaja's reign. This is the facet of Ranbir Singh's reign which one needs to revisit if we have to understand the modern-day Dogra culture. The fact that the Jammu city is known as the city of temples is a testament to the activities which were undertaken by the Maharaja. The present day Dharmarth Trust is responsible for maintaining the temple records, their history and this is the legacy of Maharaja Ranbir Singh. It also needs to be pointed out that the Library of Raghunath temple showcases his attachment to literary activities and those texts continue to enrich our knowledge about our past. The paintings of his time which are preserved at the Dogra Art Gallery give us an insight into the culture of those days and arise a sense of nostalgia about Dogra culture.

Therefore, it is not only important to view his reign as a period which was crucial from the point of view of political consolidation but equal understanding needs to be attributed to the cultural consolidation which the region experienced and how the Dogra Culture particularly came about in its true form. The idea should be to give up peep hole approach of boxing his contributions into just social or political or cultural but rather approach his reign with a more open mind and take all these factors into consideration along with the shrewd

British policy of the time and the intrigues from the corner of his own family. This wholesome approach would help one to recreate his reign as close as it was to reality.

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