

# **Maharaja Ranbir Singh, Dogra Culture and Continuity**

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The foundation of the modern state of Jammu and Kashmir has been well documented with much debate on the role of Maharaja Gulab Singh in the formation of the modern erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir and policies of the British and 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, so much so that the cultural developments that took place under Maharaja Ranbir Singh have not been revisited in recent times. The state, which consisted of varying cultural and ethnic entities, was amalgamated and unified under the efficient and able rule 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. In such an atmosphere, the Maharaja's guiding role emerged in every field and undertook various steps to shape and consolidate the region's culture.

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

## **Reformist Activities**

The first and foremost step that he undertook was concerning the excess taxation prevalent in the administration, which was effectively revised under his reign to enhance the welfare of the people. This zeal found expression in every aspect of the upliftment of society, be it economic, social, or religious. It was initiated by reforms in the administrative sphere, and

subsequently, a transformation in the socio-economic domain was 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 the changes that had been introduced in social reforms gained momentum, and it seems that, as a monarch, the Maharaja was a 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 it is indicative of his far-sightedness in the governance of his people.

Maharaja Ranbir Singh was a man who had immense pride in his culture and religion, and he took various steps to preserve it by extending patronage to literary activities. However, this doesn't in any way mean that he did not have an inclusive personality. He was responsible for the renovation of the Jama Masjid and didn't interfere in the religious activities of non-Hindus and never indulged in any oppressive measures for propagating his 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 the construction of dharmshalas, 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 several schools, *maktabs*, and *pathshalas*. To serve the purpose of educational upliftment of people, he made education free at all levels and provided stipends along with free books. Here again, the consideration of opening *maktabs* for Muslim subjects showcases his benevolent and liberal attitude. Along with the Indian medicine systems like Ayurveda and Unani, a Western system of medicine was also given due consideration for the medical development of the region.

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

Maharaja Ranbir Singh's reign is considered the age of renaissance in the erstwhile state of J&K. Just like the European renaissance, which led to the outburst of literary activities and production of vast literature, and flourishing of languages. Maharaja also took various measures to enhance the literary activities in the states. He even donated to various Sanskrit institutions at Banaras and established a *pathshala* at Kashi at his own expense, providing benevolent grants for the establishment of Punjab University at Lahore. All these activities revealed his intellectual bent of mind and the importance of cultural development for

him. Further, for the moral upliftment of his subjects, he compiled the *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. It was probably his keen interest in literature that motivated him to establish such *pathshalas*, and later they emerged as cultural hubs, and this was well organized with the establishment of the Dharmartha trust.

The presence of various manuscripts of Sanskrit, Hindi, Dogri, Persian, etc., in his library reflects 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 many manuscripts were corrected and authenticated under his guidance. Along with the manuscripts, the commentaries on the *Vedas*, the *Puranas*, and *the 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 aspect of literary activity undertaken in his reign was the stress laid on the Dogra cultural renaissance by a revival of the Dogri script and its promotion. Dogri was made the medium of exchange and was given the status equal to Persian. Sanskrit texts were compiled in the Dogri script instead of the Devanagari script. Since the Dogri alphabet was imperfect in its old form, it was brought closer to Devanagari, however, with some variation. For the popularization of Dogri, temple structures again played an important role, particularly the Raghunath *pathshala*.

*Dharmarth* and its activities were another feather that is attributed to Maharaja Ranbir Singh's cultural activities. Although it was established by Maharaja Gulab Singh, it was regularized 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 society. Here, it needs to be understood that it was reorganized for the spiritual upliftment of society. Grants were given to the temples, which became cultural centers. 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 centers. The organization 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 scholarly and research activities have been established, and it is the most well-known aspect of the Maharaja's reign. This is the facet of Ranbir Singh's reign that one needs to revisit if we have to understand the modern-day Dogra culture. The fact that Jammu city is known as the city of temples is a testament to the activities that were undertaken by the Maharaja. The present-day *Dharmarth* Trust is responsible for maintaining the temple records and 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 create a sense of nostalgia about Dogra culture.

Therefore, it is not only important to view his reign as a period that 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 remain to give up Peep's whole approach of boxing his contributions into just social, political, or cultural, but rather approach his reign with a more open mind and consider all these factors 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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