

Key concepts

- Ranjit Singh was born on November 13, 1780 in Gujranwala City, Punjab, which is now in modern day Pakistan. He was born into a Sikh Jat family of the Sandhawalia Clan, to Sardar Maha Singh Sukerchakia and Sardarni Mai Raj Kaur, the daughter of Raja Gajpat Singh of the Jind Kingdom. At the time, large parts of the Punjab were ruled by the Sikhs, who had divided the territory among factions known as Misls, each with its own powerful Sikh chieftain.
- The Sikh Empire, now known as Punjab, was a region spanning the border into modern-day People’s Republic of China and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.
- The Sikh Empire was very secular since it allowed men from different religions to rise to commanding positions of authority. His army even included a few Europeans.

- Sikhism was not the state religion; the broad religious outlook was reflected in according due respect to all religions.
- Sikhs were not treated as a privileged class and no disabilities were placed on non-Sikh subjects. There was no interference with the religious and cultural life of other communities. They were allowed to freely practise their religions without payment of a special tax. There were no discriminating tariffs. All subjects were given complete freedom of expression and worship.

- Ranjit Singh built his rule on religious foundations. He referred to his Government as Sarkar-i-Khalsa, which derived its legitimacy from the Khalsa. He attributed every success to the favour of God, and he styled himself and the people collectively as the Khalsa or Commonwealth of Gobind. His state salutation was Wahe-i-Guru Ji Ka Khalsa, Wahe-i-Guru Ji Ki Fateh (Khalsa belongs to God and its victory is the victory of God). His official seal bore the word- Akal Sahai (May God help). The term also indicated that the Khalsa did not owe its allegiance to any earthly power and acted in total devotion to Akal (The Timeless Reality).



Key quotes

- “Sahib Singh Bedi daubed Ranjit Singh’s forehead with saffron paste and proclaimed him Maharajah of the Punjab. A royal salute was fired from the fort. In the afternoon the young Maharajah rode on his elephant, showering gold and silver coins on jubilant crowds of his subjects. In the evening all the homes of the city were illumined.” (A History of the Sikhs – Khuswant Singh)
- “Ranjit Singh changed the entire organisation of the Khalsa army. The cavalry ceased to be the most important arm and the infantry became the favourite service.” (Shiv Kumar Gupta)
- “Ranjit Singh was remarkably humane at a time when India and the world seethed with callousness and inhumanity. He built up a kingdom and a powerful army, and yet he disliked bloodshed. He abolished the death sentence for every crime, however heinous it might be, when in England even petty pilferers had to face death.” (Jawahar Lal Nehru – Discovery of India)
- “There were no communal riots throughout his reign, and capital punishment and cow slaughter was banned. Laws were strictly enforced, justice was quick, and for the first time, untouchables became part of his army. People from all communities, castes, tribes and nations worked together to build one of the most enlightened empires in the world.” (Aneeta Chakrabarty).

Key words

Ranjit Singh	Punjab	Sikh Empire	state religion	khalsa
Akal	privileged	cultural	jat	commonwealth
worship	discrimination	secular	Sarkar-i-khalsa	Gobind

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some would argue that Sikh identity was lost in Ranjit Singh’s empire, while others would argue that it strengthened Sikh identity.

Some would argue that it was a secular empire.

Key questions

To what extent was religion important in Ranjit Singh’s empire?

Where does Ranjit Singh stand in terms of importance in the development of Sikhism?

Is Ranjit Singh more important in Sikhism than Guru Arjan?