Maharaja Ranjit Singh

Maharaja of Punjab
Maharaja of Lahore
Sher-i-Punjab (Lion of Punjab)
Sarkar-i-Wallah (Head of State)
Sarkar Khalsa ji (Head of the Army)
Napoleon of East
Lord of Five Rivers
Singh Sahib

Maharaja Ranjit Singh

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<th><strong>Reign</strong></th>
<th>12 April 1801 - 27 June 1839</th>
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<td><strong>Investiture</strong></td>
<td>12 April 1801</td>
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<td><strong>Successor</strong></td>
<td>Maharaja Kharak Singh</td>
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| **Born** | 13 November 1780
Gujranwala, Sukerchakia Misl (present-day Pakistan) |
| **Died** | 27 June 1839 (aged 58)
Lahore, Punjab, Sikh Empire (present-day Pakistan) |
| **Burial** | Cremated remains stored in the Samadhi of Ranjit Singh in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan |
| **Father** | Sardar Maha Singh |
Maharaja Ranjit Singh (Punjabi: ਮਹਾਰਾਜਾ ਰਣਜੀਤ ਸਿੰਘ), (13 November 1780 – 27 June 1839), was the founder of the Sikh Empire, which came to power in the northwest Indian subcontinent in the early half of the 19th century. He survived smallpox in infancy but lost sight in his left eye. He fought his first battle alongside his father at age 10. After his father died, he fought several wars to expel Afghans in his teenage years, and was proclaimed as the "Maharaja of Punjab" at age 21. His Empire grew in the Punjab region under his leadership through 1839.

Prior to his rise, the Punjab region had numerous warring misls (confederacies), twelve of which were under Sikh rulers and one by a Muslim. Ranjit Singh successfully absorbed and united the Sikh misls, took over other local kingdoms to create the Sikh Empire. He repeatedly defeated the invasions by Muslim armies particularly those arriving from Afghanistan, and established friendly relations with the British.

Ranjit Singh's reign introduced reforms, modernization, investment into infrastructure and general prosperity. His Khalsa Army and government included Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims and Europeans. His legacy includes a period of Sikh cultural and artistic renaissance, particularly with the rebuilding of the Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar and other major gurudwaras, including Takht Sri Patna Sahib, Bihar and Hazur Sahib Nanded, Maharashtra under his sponsorship. He was popularly known as Sher-i-Punjab, meaning "Lion of Punjab".

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was succeeded by his son, Maharaja Kharak Singh.

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Biography

Early life

Ranjit Singh was born on 13 November 1780, to Mahan Singh Sukkarchakkia and Raj Kaur – the daughter of Raja Gajpat Singh of Jind, in Gujranwala, in the Majha region of Punjab. At first he was named Buddh Singh, after his ancestor who was a disciple of Guru Gobind Singh, a Khalsa and whose descendants created the Sukkarchakkia misl before the birth of Ranjit Singh, a misl that became the most powerful of many small Sikh kingdoms in northwest South Asia, in the wake of disintegrating Mughal Empire. The child's name was changed to Ranjit (literally, "victor in battle") by his father to commemorate his army's victory over the Muslim Chattha chieftain Pir Muhammad.

Ranjit Singh caught smallpox as an infant, which resulted in the loss of sight in his left eye and a pockmarked face. He was short stunted, never schooled, did not learn to read or write anything beyond the Gurmukhi alphabet, but he was trained at home in horse riding, musketry and other martial arts.

At age 12, his father died. He then inherited his father's Sukkarchakkia misl estates, was raised by his mother Raj Kaur, who with Lakhpat Rai also managed the estates. The first assassination attempt on his life was made when he was age 13, by Hashmat Khan, but Ranjit Singh prevailed and killed the assailant instead. At age 18, his mother died, while his estate manager Lakhpat Rai was assassinated, and thereon he was helped by his mother-in-law from his first marriage.

In his teens, Ranjit Singh took to alcohol, a habit that became intense in later decades of his life, according to the chronicles of his court historians and the Europeans who visited him. However, he neither smoked nor ate beef, and required all his officials in his court – regardless of their religion – to adhere to these restrictions as part of their employment contract.

Marriages
Ranjit Singh married many times, by various ceremonies, and had twenty wives. Some scholars note that the information on Ranjit Singh's marriages is unclear, and there is evidence that he had many mistresses. According to Khushwant Singh, in an 1889 interview with the French journal *Le Voltaire*, his son Dalip (Duleep) Singh remarked, "I am the son of one of my father's forty six wives".

At age 15, Ranjit Singh married his first wife Mahitab Kaur, the daughter of Sada Kaur – the ruler of Kanhaiya Misl. This marriage was pre-arranged as an attempt to reconcile warring Sikh misls, wherein Mahitab Kaur was betrothed to Ranjit Singh. However, the marriage failed, with Mahitab Kaur never forgiving the fact that her father had been killed by Ranjit Singh's father and she living mostly with her mother after marriage. The break became complete when Ranjit Singh married his second wife Raj Kaur of Nakai Misl in 1798. Mahitab Kaur died in 1813.

Raj Kaur (renamed Datar Kaur), the daughter of Sardar Ran Singh Nakai, the third ruler of Nakai Misl, was Ranjit Singh's second wife and the mother of his heir, Kharak Singh. She changed her name from Raj Kaur to avoid confusion with Ranjit Singh's mother. Throughout her life she remained the favourite of Ranjit Singh who called her Mai Nakain. Like his first marriage, the second marriage brought him a strategic military alliance. His second wife died in 1818.

Ratan Kaur and Daya Kaur were wives of Sahib Singh Bhangi of Gujrat (a misl north of Lahore, not to be confused the state of Gujarat). After Sahib Singh's death, Ranjit Singh took them under his protection in 1811 by marrying them by the rite of *chādar andāzī*, in which a cloth sheet was unfurled over each of their heads. Ratan Kaur gave birth to Multana Singh in 1819, and Daya Kaur gave birth to Kashmira Singh in 1819 and to Pashaura Singh in 1821.

The other women he married include Moran Sarkar in 1802, Chand Kaur in 1815, Lachmi in 1820, Mehatab Kaur in 1822, Saman Kaur in 1832, as well as Guddan, Banso, Gulbahar, Gulab, Ram Devi, Rani, Bannat, Har and Danno before his last marriage.
Jind Kaur was the last marriage of Ranjit Singh. Her father, Manna Singh Aulakh, extolled her virtues to Ranjit Singh, who was concerned about the frail health of his only heir, Kharak Singh. The Maharaja married her in 1835 by 'sending his arrow and sword to her village'. On 6 September 1838 she gave birth to Duleep Singh, who became the last Maharaja of the Sikh Empire.

Punishment by the Akal Takht

In 1802, Ranjit Singh married Moran Sarkar, a Muslim nautch girl. This action, and other non-Sikh activities of the Maharaja, upset orthodox Sikhs, including the Nihangs, whose leader Akali Phula Singh was the Jathedar of the Akal Takht. When Ranjit Singh visited Amritsar, he was called outside the Akal Takht, where he was made to apologise for his mistakes. Akali Phula Singh took Ranjit Singh to a tamarind tree in front of the Akal Takht and prepared to punish him by flogging. Then Akali Phula Singh asked the nearby Sikh pilgrims whether they approved Ranjit Singh's apology. The pilgrims responded with Sat Sri Akal and Ranjit Singh was released and forgiven.

Sons

Ranjit Singh had eight sons. Kharak Singh was the eldest from his second wife. His first wife gave birth to Ishar Singh, who died at the age of two, and, after her separation from Ranjit Singh, to the twins Tara Singh and Sher Singh. The two widows he took under his protection and married gave birth to Multana Singh, Kashmira Singh and Pashaura Singh. Duleep Singh was from his last wife. Ranjit Singh acknowledged only Kharak Singh and Duleep Singh as his biological sons.

Death

In the 1830s, Ranjit Singh faced several health complications and stroke, which some historical records attribute to alcoholism and a failing liver.

On June 27, 1839, Ranjit Singh died in his sleep. Four of his wives, and seven concubines with royal titles given by Ranjit Singh, committed sati by burning themselves on the pyre of Ranjit Singh, during his official cremation ceremony.

Sikh Empire

Maharaja Ranjit Singh
circa 1816-29

**Historical context**

After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the Mughal Empire fell apart and declined in its ability to tax or govern most of South Asia. In the northwestern region, particularly Panjab, the creation of the Khalsa community of Sikh warriors by Guru Gobind Singh accelerated the decay and fragmentation of the Mughal power. Afghans attacked the Indus river valleys, were resisted by both organized armies of the Khalsa Sikhs, as well as became victims of irregular battles by Khalsa based in small collection of villages. The Sikhs had appointed their own zamindars, replacing the previous Muslim revenue collectors, which provided resources to feed and strengthen the warriors aligned to Sikh interests. The colonial traders and East India Company had begun operations in India, on its east and west coasts.

By the second half of the 18th century, the northwestern parts of South Asia (now Pakistan and parts of north India) were a collection of fourteen small warring regions. Of the 14, states Khushwant Singh, twelve were Sikh controlled misls (confederacies), one named Kasur (near Lahore) was Muslim controlled and one in the southeast led by an Englishman named George Thomas. This region constituted the fertile and productive valleys of the five rivers – Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Bias and Sutlej. The Sikh misls were all under the control of the Khalsa fraternity of Sikh warriors, but they were not united and warring each other driven by the revenue collected, disagreements and local priorities; however, in the event of external invasions such as from the Muslim armies of Ahmed Shah Abdali from Afghanistan they would usually unite. Towards the end of 18th century, the five most powerful misls were those of Sukkarchakkia, Kanhayas, Nakkais, Ahluwalias and Bhangi Sikhs. Ranjit Singh belonged to the first, and through marriage had a reliable alliance with Kanhayas and Nakkais. Among the smaller misls, some such as the Phulkias misl had switched loyalties in late 18th century and supported the Afghan army invasion against their Khalsa brethren. The Kasur region ruled by a Pathan-Muslim always supported the Afghan invasion forces and joined them in plundering Sikh misls during the war.

**Rise to fame, early conquests**

"Randjiit Sing Baadour" by
Alfred de Dreux

Ranjit Singh’s fame grew in 1797, at age 17, when the Afghan Muslim ruler Shah Zaman, of the Ahmad Shah Abdali dynasty, attempted to annex Panjab region into his control through his general
Shahanchi Khan and 12,000 soldiers. The battle was fought in the territory that fell in Ranjit Singh controlled misl, whose regional knowledge and warrior expertise helped kill the Afghan general and rout his army. This victory gained him recognition. In 1798, the Afghan ruler sent in another army, which Ranjit Singh did not resist. He let them enter Lahore, then encircled them with his army, blocked off all food and supplies, burnt all crops and food sources that could have supported the Afghan army. Much of the Afghan army retreated back to Afghanistan.

In 1799, Raja Ranjit Singh's army of 25,000 Khalsa, supported by another 25,000 Khalsa led by his mother-in-law Rani Sada Kaur of Kanhaiya misl, in a joint operation attacked the region controlled by Bhangi Sikhs centered around Lahore. The rulers escaped, marking Lahore as the first major conquest of Ranjit Singh. The Sufi Muslim and Hindu population of Lahore welcomed the rule of Ranjit Singh. In 1800, the ruler of Jammu region ceded control of his region to Ranjit Singh.

On April 12, 1801 - the new year in Hindu calendar, in a formal ceremony, Ranjit Singh was coronated by Sahib Singh Bedi - a direct descendent of Guru Nanak, as the "Maharaja of Panjab" by applying a saffron mark on his forehead. He called his rule as "Sarkar Khalsa", and his court as "Darbar Khalsa".

**Expansion**

In 1802 Ranjit Singh, aged 22, took Amritsar from the Bhangi Sikh misl, went and paid homage at the Harmandir Sahib temple which had previously been attacked and desecrated by the invading Afghan army, then announced that he will renovate and rebuild it with marble and gold.

On January 1, 1806, Ranjit Singh signed a treaty with the British officials of the East India Company, where he agreed that his Sikh forces will not attempt to expand south of the Sutlej river, and they agreed that they will not attempt to militarily cross Sutlej river as they consolidate their colonial rule to create British India.

In 1807, his forces attacked the Muslim ruled misl of Kasur, and after a month of fierce fighting, defeated the Afghan chief Qutb-ud-Din, thus expanding his empire northwest towards Afghanistan. He took Multan in 1818, and the whole Bari Doab came under his rule with that conquest. In 1819, Ranjit Singh successfully defeated the Afghan Sunni Muslim rulers and annexed Srinagar and Kashmir, stretching his rule into north and the Jhelum valley, beyond the foothills of Himalayas.
The most significant encounters between the Sikhs in the command of the Maharaja and the Afghans were in 1813, 1823, 1834 and in 1837. In 1813, Ranjit Singh's general Dewan Mokham Chand led the Sikh forces against the Afghan forces of Shah Mahmud led by Dost Mohammad Khan. The Afghans lost their stronghold at Attock in that battle. In 1823, Ranjit Singh defeated a large army of Yusufzai north of the Kabul River. In 1834, he marched into Peshawar, ending the rule of Barakzais without a fight after they escaped into Afghanistan. In 1837, the Battle of Jamrud and his march through Kabul in 1838, in cooperation with the colonial British army stationed in Sindh, became the last confrontation between the Sikhs led by him and the Afghans, which helped extend and establish the western boundaries of the Sikh Empire.

In 1838, Ranjit Singh with his troops marched into Kabul to take part in the victory parade along with the British after restoring Shah Shoja to the Afghan throne at Kabul.

### Geography of the Sikh Empire

Ranjit Singh's Sikh Empire at its peak

The Sikh Empire, also known as Punjab, the Sikh Raj and Sarkar-i-Khalsa, was a region called by historians as "Punjab" or "Panjab", comprises two words "Punj/Panj/Panch" and "Ap", translating to "five" and "water" respectively in ancient Indian languages as well as Persian. When put together this gives a name meaning "the land of the five rivers", coined due to the five rivers that run through the Punjab. Those "Five Rivers" are Beas, Ravi, Sutlej, Chenab and Jhelum, all tributaries of the river Indus.

The geographical reach of the Sikh Empire under Ranjit Singh included all lands north of Sutlej river, and south of high valleys in the northwestern Himalayas. The major towns in the Empire included Srinagar, Attock, Peshawar, Bannu, Rawalpindi, Jammu, Gujrat, Sialkot, Kangra, Amritsar, Lahore and Multan.

### Governance

Ranjit Singh allowed men from different religions and races to serve in his army and his government in various positions of authority. His army included a few Europeans like Jean-François Allard, however he did not employ the British which were attempting to create a British colony in South Asia. However, he kept an open dialogue and diplomatic channel with the British; in 1828, Ranjit Singh sent gifts to the King of England and in 1831, he sent a mission to Simla to confer with the British Governor General, Lord William Bentinck, while in 1838, he cooperated with them in removing the Islamic Sultan in Afghanistan.

Ranjit Singh banned cow slaughter in his empire. He objected to cow slaughter inside the
British camp during joint operations in northwestern region of South Asia. In employment contracts he gave to foreigners such as the Europeans, he insisted that they do not eat beef, not smoke, not cut their hair, marry and settle down with Indian women.

The Sikhs led by Ranjit Singh never razed places of worship to the ground belonging to the enemy. He restored and built historic Sikh Gurdwaras – most famously the Golden Temple of Amritsar, but he also joined the Hindus in their temples as Vedic hymns were chanted, visited Sufi mosques and holy places, and ordered his soldiers to neither loot nor molest civilians.

**The Sikh Khalsa Army under Ranjit Singh**

![Ranjit Singh's army included Europeans. Left: Jean-François Allard, Right: Alexander Gardner](image)

The army under Ranjit Singh was not limited to the Sikh community. The soldiers and troop officers included Sikhs, but also included Hindus, Muslims and Europeans. Hindu Brahmins and people of all creeds and castes served his army, while the composition in his government also reflected a religious diversity. His army included Polish, Russian, Spanish, Prussian and French officers. In 1835, as his relationship with the British warmed up, he hired a British officer named Foulkes.

However, the Khalsa army of Ranjit Singh reflected regional population, and as he grew his army, he dramatically increased the Rajput and Jat Sikhs who became the predominant members of his army. In the Doab region his army was composed of the Jat Sikhs, in Jammu and northern Indian hills it was Hindu Rajputs, while relatively more Muslims served his army in the Jhelum river area closer to Afghanistan than other major Panjab rivers.

**Reforms**

Ranjit Singh changed and improved the training and organisation of his army. He reorganized responsibility and set performance standards in logistical efficiency in troop deployment, manoeuvre, and marksmanship. He reformed the staffing to emphasize steady fire over cavalry and guerrilla warfare, improved the equipment and methods of war. The military system of Ranjit Singh combined the best of both old and new ideas. He strengthened the infantry and the artillery. He paid the members of the standing army from treasury, instead of the Mughal method of paying an army with local feudal levies.

While Ranjit Singh introduced reforms in terms of training and equipment of his military, he failed to reform the old Jagirs (Ijra) system of Mughal middlemen. The Jagirs system of state revenue collection involved certain individuals with political connections or inheritance promising a tribute (nazarana) to the ruler and thereby gaining administrative control over certain villages, with the
right to force collect customs, excise and land tax at inconsistent and subjective rates from the
peasants and merchants; they would keep a part of collected revenue and deliver the promised
tribute value to the state. These Jagirs maintained independent armed militia to extort taxes
from the peasants and merchants, and the militia prone to violence. This system of inconsistent
taxation with arbitrary extortion by militia, continued the Mughal tradition of ill treatment of
peasants and merchants throughout the Sikh Empire, and is evidenced by the complaints filed to
Ranjit Singh by East India Company officials attempting to trade within different parts of the Sikh
Empire.

According to historical records, states Sunit Singh, Ranjit Singh's reforms focused on military that
would allow new conquests, but not towards taxation system to end abuse, nor about introducing
uniform laws in his state or improving internal trade and empowering the peasants and
merchants. This failure to reform the Jagirs-based taxation system and economy, in part led to
a succession power struggle and a series of threats, internal divisions among Sikhs, major
assassinations and coups in the Sikh Empire in the years immediately after the death of Ranjit
Singh; an easy annexation of the remains of the Sikh Empire into British India followed, with the
colonial officials offering the Jagirs better terms and the right to keep the system intact.

**Infrastructure investments**

Ranjit Singh ensured that Panjab manufactured and was self-sufficient in all weapons, equipment
and munitions his army needed. His government invested in infrastructure in the 1800s and
thereafter, established raw materials mines, cannon foundries, gunpowder and arm factories.
Some of these operations were owned by the state, others operated by private Sikh operatives.

However, Ranjit Singh did not make major investments in other infrastructure such as irrigation
canals to improve the productivity of land and roads. The prosperity in his Empire, in contrast to the
Mughal-Sikh wars era, largely came from the improvement in the security situation, reduction in
violence, reopened trade routes and greater freedom to conduct commerce.

**Mughal accounts**

The mid 19th-century Muslim historians, such as Shahamat Ali who experienced the Sikh Empire
first hand, presented a different view on Ranjit Singh's Empire and governance. According to
Ali, Ranjit Singh's government was despotic, and he was a mean monarch in contrast to the
Mughals. The initial momentum for the Empire building in these accounts is stated to be Ranjit
Singh led Khalsa army's "insatiable appetite for plunder", their desire for "fresh cities to pillage",
and entirely eliminating the Mughal era "revenue intercepting intermediaries between the peasant-
cultivator and the treasury".

According to Ishtiaq Ahmed, Ranjit Singh's rule led to further persecution of Muslims in Kashmir,
expanding the previously selective persecution of Shia Muslims and Hindus by Afghan Sunni Muslim
rulers between 1752 and 1819 before Kashmir became part of his Sikh Empire. Bikramjit Hasrat
describes Ranjit Singh as a "benevolent despot".

The Muslim accounts of Ranjit Singh's rule were questioned by Sikh historians of the same era. For
example, Ratan Singh Bhangu in 1841 wrote that these accounts were not accurate, and according
to Anne Murphy, he remarked, "when would a Musalman praise the Sikhs?" In contrast, the
colonial era British military officer Hugh Pearse in 1898 criticized Ranjit Singh's rule, as one
founded on "violence, treachery and blood". Sohan Seetal disagrees with this account and states
that Ranjit Singh had encouraged his army to respond with a "tit for tat" against the enemy, violence
Decline

Scholars state that Ranjit Singh made his Empire and the Sikhs a strong political force, achievements for which he is deeply admired and revered in Sikhism. However, his era also marked the general decline in religious and moral fervor from alcoholism and licentious life, along with demoralization of the Sikh court and nobility. Ranjit Singh failed to establish a lasting structure for Sikh government or stable succession, and the Sikh Empire rapidly declined after his death. The British easily defeated the confused and demoralized Khalsa forces, then disbanded them into destitution.

Other scholars, such as Harjot Oberoi state that while the decline from licentiousness is evidenced, yet this is not linked to Sikhism nor does it imply that Sikhism declined. This phenomena, states Oberoi, is observed in many Empires and cultures.

Another explanation, according to Clive Dewey, was the Jagirs-based taxation system and economy that Ranjit Singh inherited and retained from the Mughal times. After his death, a fight to control the tax spoils emerged, leading to a power struggle within the nobles and his family from different wives, ending in a rapid series of assassinations of his descendants and palace coups, and the annexation of the Sikh Empire into the colonial British Empire.

Legacy

A lithograph by Emily Eden showing one of the favourite horses of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his collection of jewels, including the Koh-i-Noor.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh is remembered for uniting Sikhs, and founding the Sikh Empire. He amassed considerable wealth, including gaining the possession of the Koh-i-Noor diamond from Shuja Shah Durrani of Afghanistan. Ranjit Singh willed the Koh-i-Noor to Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha in 1839. He is also remembered for his conquests and building a well-trained, self-sufficient Khalsa army to protect a prosperous Sikh Empire.

His most lasting legacy was the restoration and expansion of the Harmandir Sahib, most revered Gurudwara of the Sikhs, with marble and gold, from which the popular name of the "Golden Temple"
Gurdwaras built by Maharaja Ranjit Singh

At the Harmandir Sahib, much of the present decorative gilding and marblework date back from the early 19th century. The gold and intricate marble work were conducted under the patronage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Maharaja of the Punjab. He was a generous patron of the shrine and is remembered with much affection by the Sikhs. Ranjit Singh also sponsored protective walls and water supply system to strengthen security and operations related to the temple. Maharaja Ranjit Singh deeply loved and admired the teachings of the Tenth Guru of Sikhism Guru Gobind Singh, in whose memory he built two of the most sacred temples in Sikhism. These are Takht Sri Patna Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Gobind Singh, and Takht Sri Hazur Sahib, the place where Guru Gobind Singh was assassinated, in Nanded, Maharashtra in 1708.

Memorials and museums

The Harmandir Sahib (also known as the Golden Temple) was completely renovated by Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Statue in the Parliament of India

On 20 August 2003, a 22-foot-tall bronze statue of Singh was installed in the Parliament of India. Maharaja Ranjit Singh Museum
A garden was laid out in 1818 in the north of the Amritsar city at the behalf of Shalimar Bagh of Lahore, known as Ram Bagh at the name of Guru Ram Dass. Maharaja devoted his time in this palace in summer days during the visit of Amritsar. It has been converted into the shape of Museum during the 400th years celebrations of Amritsar City. The Museum displays objects connecting to Maharaja Ranjit Singh such as arms and armour, outstanding paintings and centuries old coins, manuscripts, and jewelry.[85]

See also

- Baradari of Ranjit Singh
- History of Punjab
- Sikh Kingdom
- Sikhism
- Jind Kaur
- List of generals of Ranjit Singh

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External links

- Gallery on Sikhs Raj with Rare portraits of Sikh Raj
• Maharaja Ranjit Singh Biography
• True Account of Maharaja Ranjit Singh
• Foreign officers in Ranjit Singh's Court
• Ranjit Singh profile from sikh-history.com
• Ranjit Singh
• Official government of Pakistan cultural history article on Maharaja Ranjit Singh
• RoyalArk on Punjab's dynasty, includes extensive bios

Biographies

• Detailed article on Ranjit Singh's Army


Preceded by
Charat Singh
Preceded by
None

Leader of the Sukerchakia Misl
1792–1839

Maharaja of the Sikh Empire
1801–1839

Succeeded by
None
Succeeded by
Kharak Singh

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