



# Preservation, Resonance and Revival of Music in the Sikh Empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh

**Dr. Sangeeta**

Associate Professor

Head, Department of Music (Inst.)

Dev Samaj College for Women, Ferozepur

## ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the musical landscape of the Sikh Empire under the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and revival of music during this period. It explores how music maintained the Sikh identity and cultural cohesion that allowed it to thrive, and the efforts made to revive and sustain musical traditions. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of music in the Sikh Empire. This support played a crucial role in keeping traditional music alive that might have otherwise faded away. The paper examines the approaches used by Maharaja Ranjit Singh to maintain Sikh musical traditions, including supporting musicians, providing support to women musicians, fusing foreign music and instruments with our traditional ones. Through this evaluation, the paper highlights the Maharaja Ranjit Singh's contributions to Sikh music, which continues to influence modern practices.

**Key Words:** *Cultural, Preservation, Resonance, Revival, Sikh Empire, Music.*

## INTRODUCTION

During the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, (1801-1839,) Punjab experienced a cultural transformation more notably in music. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's patronage also introduced well-known musicians who very significantly carried the tradition of Kirtan, Dhrupad and Indian classical music. Far from retrospective, this research explores the historic value of music in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign in an attempt to understand the relevance of music in the Sikh community. His cultural policies were not only beneficial to the artistic environment of his empire, but also helped reaffirm the ethnicity of the Sikhs through music. Maharaja Ranjit Singh aided musicians which helped putting into place cultural agenda that revived and remembered the Sikh heritage, thus embracing tolerance in arts and religions within the empire.

## Objective & Significance

The study under discussion is planned to evaluate the parts that music played in the kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh with a focus on how he maintained and patronized musical heritage. This paper investigates the realities of socio-cultural environment that prevailed in the Sikh Empire concerning musical practice, the nature of sponsorship afforded to musicians and music education within the Sikh Empire. The inability of the younger generation of Punjab in understanding and appreciating the importance of such history of music, arising from their lack of exposure to classical and folk music can be put to light by this study on

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who invested immensely in preserving and promoting the continuity of these types of music. Also, the study will be committed to establishing a relationship between these historical practices and current musical tendencies in an attempt to demonstrate that the preservation and revival acts initiated during his reign continue to have greater influence today also.

### **Literature Review**

The book "Maharaja Ranjit Singh" written by Sita Ram Kohli holds an important place. He supported musicians and incorporated music into court rituals and everyday activities. This support contributed to the growth of Punjabi customs throughout his rule. In the book "The Sikhs" by Khushwant Singh, the writer writes about how there was a progression of music during the days of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. His court was as fitting to a cultural centre which got different musicians to patronize the place. Ranjit Singh's patronage laid the foundation for the preservation of its existence as part of the Sikh and Punjabi heritage. In the book "Empire of the Life and Times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh" written by Patwant Singh and Jyoti M. Rai, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign has been illustrated in detail. He notably gave importance and strong support to the Sikh music. His court at Lahore became centre of composite culture. He patronized the Sikh devotional music that included Gurbani Kirtan and encouraged the usage of traditional musical instruments including Rabab and Sarangi. Certain aspect of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's court is well explored in the book titled "Events at the Court of Ranjit Singh, 1810-1817" by H. L. O. Garrett and G. L. Chopra which focuses on the musical advancements. Ranjit Singh selected people from different music genres in Lahore and encouraged both religion and religious music of the Sikhs. He supported and enhanced the court culture and in this way, strengthened the Sikh identity during his kingdom.

### **Preservation of Indian Classical Music during the Reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh**

Great improvements in the field of music were observed in Punjab when Maharaja Ranjit Singh was in power from 1801-1839. This era ushered what can be regarded as a melting pot of music for various styles, with classical music receiving a renewed royal impulse for the artists from various backgrounds. Besides participating in other aspects of the community's life such as birth, funerals, festivals and other celebrations the integration of music served to reinforce and strengthen those traditions to their advancement. Besides being a cultural icon, music was one of the most important tools of manifestation of societal culture and formation of social identities under rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

- **Preservation and Advancement of Gurmat Sangeet**

During Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign, Sikh Music and Religious Music, known as Gurmat Sangeet, was on the peak. Pleasingly relying on singing of hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib using instruments such as Sarangi and Rabab, the genre of 'Shabad Kirtan' emerged and was played generally with Dholki in village Gurdwaras. This revival played a good part in the development of Hindustani music which carried on upto early twentieth century. The Rababis came forward and enriched the Gurmat

Sangeet in Sikh religion and acquired proficiency in various ragas and talas thereby encouraging the music lovers in Sikh religion.

The dissemination of Gurmat Sangeet under the influence of Ranjit Singh was not only about carrying forward the cultural legacy of the region but also about assertively carving out an ethno-religious Sikh identity. Musicians were protected, and thus, these sacred hymns were not only conserved, but also infused with different musical styles and form a confluence of sacred hymns and classical music.

- **Preservation and Patronage of Musical Traditions**

The court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh based in Lahore was a lively centre of artistic patronage; surrounded by performers, particularly, singing females and musicians who were important functionaries of the royal court. As an accepted practice at that time, hereditary musicians in the kingdom were given employment, gifts, and grants as a forms of royal patronage. For instance : an order declared that a well owned by Rai Manik Rai in Pannuan village would remain exempted from revenues and a Dharmarth grant of a village was given to Kharga Das Dhadi.

- **Ranjit Singh's Reign: Era of Symphonic Brilliance**

It is not surprising that a great warrior like Ranjit Singh was also a great patron of music. He enjoyed music and it is seen that he specifically liked the performances of Attar Khan on the flute and Dhrupadiya Behram Khan. There were many musicians working for Maharaja Ranjit Singh, some of the ragis names were Bhai Amera , Ragi Mansha Singh Amritsari and Bhai Maya Singh belonging to Naaiyan da gharana (Barbers musical lineage) of Amritsar.

The city of the royal court transformed into centre of assembly of musicians which because of the syncretic merging of diverse global cultures, became a fusion. During this period there was cross pollination and exchange of music ideas that triggered a lot of innovation and creativity especially in the classical music genre.

- **Upliftment of the Folk, Entertaining classes and Mirasi Community**

It speaks volumes about Maharaja Ranjit Singh that he took particular care to promote the art and craft of the Mirasi community as well as the folk music of Punjab in his kingdom. A number of singers belonged to the Mirasi community. Irrespective of their religion, they were involved actively in maintaining the rich treasure of Sikh music during the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Their profession of singing and reciting was supported by Ranjit Singh and his army. The Punjabi literature including folktales and legends chanted in the form of poetry by the bards (minstrels) were funded by noblemen. The Dums and Bhats communities were active participants in the many functions of villages in order to preserve the cultural aspect and provide entertainment.

- **Glorification of Cultural Identity**

It would be pertinent to note that during Ranjit Singh's reign, he asserted Sikh and Punjabi cultural features by infusing music that epitomized the tenets of Sikhism. Although the Rababi tradition was supposed to be initiated by Bhai Mardana Ji with Guru Nanak Ji, the hymns from this tradition upheld the unity between Hindu, Sikh and Muslim religion. Rababis continued to perform Kirtan in Gurdwaras and these practices sustained this cultural give and take. This tradition of performing continues to play in Gurdwaras is a prime example of how this balanced cultural policy exists even to this day.

### **Resonance of Music during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Reign:**

In this context, the singers and musicians at Ranjit Singh's court exhibited a colourful mix with musicians transformed by migration across genres. Singers and players of musical instruments from Punjab influenced the expansion of Hindustani Music in regions apart from Punjab. Kirtan was nurtured by artists of Ragi and Rababi origin who were trained in either Dhrupad or Khayal. Such a dynamic cultural condition paved way on the subsequent growth of a pluralistic music culture that is predominant in Punjab and beyond.

- **Cross-Cultural Influences on Music**

The diverse cultural environment which existed during maharaja's reign such as Punjabi, Persian, Afghan, and Central Asian cultures, enabled exchange of musical ideas or concepts and other genres translated one into another. Some important musical innovation came from Persia and Afghanistan which introduced different styles of music and types of musical instruments. Ghazals and Qawwalis, genres deeply rooted in Persian and Afghan musical traditions, were introduced into the Sikh court's musical culture. These forms of poetry and music were characterized by their melodic structures and emotive expression, which influenced Sikh devotional and secular music. Under the Maharaja's patronage, there existed one of the most important musical gharanas – the Patiala Gharana which took over the techniques of the mentioned traditions in their vocals, including highly developed in terms of artistic depth and stylistic sophistication of taans and murkis.

The Naqqar Khana, or drum house which was originally situated in the Sikh court, from where Persian, Afghan and local musicians together produced fusions of traditional Indian ragas with Persian melodic structures, creating a distinctive form of court music that was both grand and intricate.

Certain ragas, which form the basis of Indian classical music, were influenced by Persian modal systems. For instance, the raga Yaman, a popular evening raga, bears similarities to the Persian Dastgah system, and this influence was particularly pronounced during Ranjit Singh's time. Thus, by adopting and assimilating aspects from numerous cultural experiences, a rich and diverse culture emerged which characterized the Sikhs during the period of empire formation.

- **Showcases and Celebrations**

The arts and particularly music were exceedingly significant in the social and religious aspects during the reign of Ranjit Singh. In Lahore Darbar at Lohri, Basant, Holi, Baisakhi, Muharram, Eid-e-Milad an-Nabi, Dussehra, Diwali and other occasions etc. depicted how music was a cultural dimension. It also involved kings and queens securing such events that would keep music as one of the main activities steadily contributing to society hence the sense of togetherness was upheld.

- **Patronage of Women Musicians**

During the Sikh Empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, there were famous singing women like Ghafooran Jan, Sardar Begum and Hira Bai. These female artists, many of whom were born into prostitution, remained some of the most important performers in the court music. Notable personality such as Goki Bai of the Patiala gharana, who was a disciple of Behram Khan, was beneficial in the continual conservation and development of the musical system, which also exhibits the liberalistic policies of the Sikh Empire.

- **The Integration of Western Instruments**

During Maharaja's reign, a significant Integration took place, bringing Western musical elements into Indian traditions. The introduction of brass bands (consisting of trumpets, horns, trombones and tubas) into Indian music traditions by European officers in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army marked the beginning of a new musical tradition. Classical music was now interpreted through Western instruments, with the clarinet becoming a central feature. This fusion enriched the musical landscape of the period, blending the richness of Indian classical music with the distinctive sounds of Western instrumentation. Harmonium and Violin were foreign instruments till his regime but later Harmonium became an important instrument in the Sikh Culture.

- **Indian Classical Music Reverberations**

Renowned musicians like Alamgir Khan and Master Sohni Khan were produced in the Qasur gharana under the reign of Maharaja. Qasur School of music was founded by Irshad Ali Khan who was the court singer of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, meanwhile, became well-known for his innovative singing and changed the Punjabi music industry. With Ranjit Singh's assistance, the rich musical legacy of the gharana - showcasing artists like Ustad Ali Bakhsh Khan and Ustad Kale Khan grew and was used to promote the preservation and dissemination of music.

### **Revival of Indian Music during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh:**

The introduction of the music during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh was indeed very beneficial to the Punjab region and its cultural development. These characteristics of Maharaja Ranjit Singh as stated above made the Punjabi music to be recognized as the golden era for music.

- **Revival of Music in Religion**

Religious music was another critical component of the Sikhs' way of life during the rule of the Sikh Empire. Chanting or singing hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib called Kirtan and it was very important ritual in Sikhism. These hymns were sung to classical ragas and the singers were accompanied by traditional music instruments which made it very interesting and a spiritual experience to the devotees. This also served to keep the sacred hymns in tune and passed from one generation to another.

- **The Global Influence of Ranjit Singh's Musical Patronage**

The renaissance of music in Sikh Kingdom in the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh affected not only the political frontier but beyond it. The exchange of musical ideas and the assimilation of extra influences played a part to spread Indian classical music globally. The patronages granted to foreign musicians helped foster cross-cultural experiences which helped to diversify the world's musical pool. It means that while traditional music types were maintained, the focus on musical education helped to keep and develop these types with the new influences.

- **Resurgence of Spiritual Melodies: The Revival of Devotional Music**

During Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign, the city of Amritsar experienced a cultural renaissance, notably through the establishment of numerous Bungas around Harimandir Sahib. Training of music instruments like those in Harimandir Sahib, was given in these Bungas. These residential buildings, served as centres for promoting Sikh music, reflecting the growing political power of the Sikhs. Each Bunga became a hub for Gurmat education, Kirtan instruction, and theological studies, playing a pivotal role in nurturing musical talent and fostering the revival of Indian classical music during this vibrant period of Sikh history. This period was marked by a dynamic amalgamation of styles which highlighted the depth and versatility of Indian classical music.

- **Echoes of Sufism**

Maharaja Ranjit Singh played a pivotal role in enhancing Sufi culture in Punjab by funding the construction of the "Darbar Hazrat Sayyid Peer Badar Shah Diwan" near Batala. Upon the advice of his foreign minister Fakir Azizuddin, Maharaja Ranjit Singh sought the blessings of Peer Badar Shah Diwan to ensure victory in a battle of Peshawar. After the successful campaign, Maharaja Ranjit Singh honored the Peer by constructing this khangah which became a significant centre for Sufi music and spiritual activities, reflecting the Maharaja's commitment to promoting religious and cultural inclusivity in his empire. The Urs Mubarak is celebrated with great enthusiasm at this Khanqah every year. During these events, Sufi musicians perform their art for the audience. Notable Sufi performers such as the Wadali Brothers, Shaukat Matoi Ali, and Mohammad Sharif take part in the Urs. Today, young artists also contribute significantly to promoting and continuing this tradition.

## CONCLUSION

The period of rule by Maharaja Ranjit Singh proves to be quite significant in terms of cultural and musical that is still appreciated in Punjab and other regions to this date. He brought progressive changes in the society and the musical creations that were made during his reign helped set the foundation for the active musical culture that is witnessed today in the modern world. It is therefore not a secret that the influence of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's patronage on music can still be felt to date with more people embracing Indian classical music.

Thus, exploring the preservation, resonance and revival of the music during Maharaja Ranjit Singh reign will help in understanding the benefits of preserving cultures. Their diverse influence, education, training, and patronage extension are important lessons for modern attempts at the maintenance and renewal of certain ethnic practices. The benefits that he has bequeathed to the world regarding music prove the relevance of his leadership and dedication to development and growth of arts and culture.

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