

## Leadership Profiling of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

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**ABSTRACT:** *Using history to understand important leadership concepts such as strategic thinking, problem solving, effective communication and team building can make these concepts not only much more accessible and comprehensible, but also interesting, relevant and memorable. In today's ultra-competitive business world, executives are pressured to deploy all the weapons in their arsenals to stay ahead of the opposition and win the day. The need to tap the wisdom and experience of some of history's greatest leaders is more today than ever before. Though they may be long gone, their achievements still stand. In fact, history can be relevant & inspiring for today's executives to gain valuable insight and direction. Maharaja Ranjit Singh (13 November 1780 – 20 June 1839), the first Maharaja of the Sikh Empire, was held up as master strategist, an exemplary leader, someone whose ideas & tactics corporate India can emulate. His inspiring dream was to unite the Sikhs in mind & in soul. The visionary leadership style of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is the classic mould of leadership currently taught in business schools & military academies.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

**It is a common refrain that – “Future is a projection of the past”.**

In this light, it may not be an overstatement that in order to frame futuristic leadership skills, an organization may bask in the glory of historical figures whose leadership skills have stood the test of time. The word “War” has become symbolic for today's business world. Whether it is globalization, hostile takeovers or competition on all fronts, it has become the order of the day. Instead of cannons, companies are deploying computer networks, broadband and e-commerce to assail their opponents. In fact, the annals of history boast an endless supply of visionary leaders, gripping events, and epic story lines.

Times of trouble often spawn great leaders. As we peep down memory lane, one such leader stands out & that leader is Maharaja Ranjit Singh (13 November 1780 – 20 June 1839), the first Maharaja of the Sikh Empire. Held up as master strategist, an exemplary leader, someone whose ideas & tactics corporate India can emulate. His inspiring dream was to unite the Sikhs in mind & in soul. The visionary leadership style of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is the classic mould of leadership currently taught in business schools & military academies. His leadership style can be considered the most effective of all styles because it communicates a sense of common purpose to people. A strong business case for this style can be made when looking at the retention of employees, pride in the organization, inspired and empowered employees, and a shared sense of goals and purpose.

#### **Maharaja Ranjit Singh : Sher-e-Punjab**

On the departure of Alexander the Great from India in 323 B.C., repeated conflicts on the Indian soil continued to weaken the country. From the Mauryas to the Muslim invaders & to the British, it was the people of the Punjab, who bore the brunt of centuries of invasions, & their rugged character was honed in the increasing clash of arms over the years. Into this bloodied landscape of Punjab, Ranjit Singh, the only son of Mahan Singh Sukerchakia & Raj Kaur, was born on 13 November 1780. Few men over the ages have matched his rare qualities of leadership. Whether in the field of battle; in providing just rule to men & women from the most diverse religious backgrounds; in the humane treatment of his adversaries ; or in achieving so much in one eventful, action-packed lifetime, not many measure up to his extraordinary achievements. In the 1790's, the Punjab looked like a jig-saw puzzle: twelve misls, the Afghans in the north-west, the Rajputs of Kangra in the north; the Gurkha in the north-east; the British in the east; and the Marathas in the south-east, the Pathan-controlled district of Kasur in the neighbourhood of Lahore, and the Hansi in the south-east under the English adventurer, George Thomas. Misl (from the Persian word "misl" meaning "similar" or "alike") generally refers to the twelve sovereign states in the Sikh Confederacy. Ranjit Singh belonged to the Sukerchakia misl, whose chief he became at the age of 12. The misl organization had ceased to be the united fraternity & was a makeshift arrangement suited to meet the challenge of foreign invasions. Altogether he created an extraordinary empire of the Sikhs, the borders of which extended beyond India & into Afghanistan & China. He also held British in check for 40 years to the south of his realm & closed the Khyber Pass through which invaders & plunderers had for centuries poured into India.

## II. LEADERSHIP PROFILING OF MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH

### 1) Visionary outlook & Initiative

When a manager is put in a position of authority, he may be needed to lead the organization during a time of transition. Vision plays a very important role in managing change. If the leadership of an organization understands the vital role vision plays in managing change, the organization will be more likely to undergo transition successfully. Ranjit Singh's vision of a united Sikh empire & the courage to take initiative in that direction can be used by business schools to understand the various nuances in effective leadership.

- a) Nobody before him had ever construed of the consolidation of the twelve Sikh confederacies (Misls) into a unified force. The initiative he took of taking over the misls could have made him or break him, nevertheless he went ahead with all the odds against him & was victorious in accomplishing which proved significant in his future campaigns & uniting the Sikhs, which had never been accomplished before.
- b) Around 20 June 1839 when Ranjit Singh's inner voice finally appeared to have convinced him that the end was near, he ordered all his superior officers, European & Indian, to be assembled in his presence & take the oath of allegiance to the heir-apparent, his son Kanwar Kharak Singh; this ensured that, contrary to general expectation, he succeeded smoothly & without opposition to his father's throne.
- c) Ranjit Singh had the far-sightedness to gauge the attractiveness of the Koh-i-Noor for any empire. When his condition became increasingly serious & on 26 June 1839, he asked that the Koh-i-Noor diamond be donated to the Hindu temple of Jagannathpuri in Orissa. If this last wish of Ranjit Singh's had been carried out, the Koh-i-Noor would still be in India & not in the possession of the British crown.
- d) Some of the critics suggest that the Sutlej treaty showed him in poor light since he abandoned the Sikhs living between the Jamuna & the Sutlej, but accepting this view is to discount his evolving strategy & his clear vision. Ranjit Singh knew that the only obstacle left between the British & their dominance of the whole of India was the land of the five rivers under Sikh rule. The treaty assured him that the British government would not concern itself with his territorial acquisitions north of the river Sutlej & moreover Ranjit Singh was canny enough to appreciate the importance of a well-defined boundary between British possessions & the Sikh state.
- e) Ranjit Singh had no doubt over the exceptional fighting qualities of the Sikhs, and their courage & commitment on the battlefield. The decision of modernization of the army made him a force to reckon with. Until then the backbone of the Sikh armies had been the cavalier armed with spear, sword & musket. He trained his armies on modern lines through his European Generals like Allard, Ventura and Avitable. Among the Indian princes Ranjit Singh was the first to train his army to a level at par with Western armies.

### 2) Realistic

***"Don't be impatient, mother, I shall not only take my own lands but will also finish off the intruders."***

#### ***Maharaja Ranjit Singh***

In today's corporate world, one needs to go where no one has gone. Until Ranjit Singh marched into Lahore and made it a Sikh territory, it was considered beyond the reach of any Sikh. He had a vision of what could be, and he made that vision a reality. Henry Ford had a vision, so did Walt Disney, Steve Jobs, Bill Bowerman, and Branson. They all focused on creating and building, not just on learning.

- a) The complexity of Punjab, whether in its religious or its demographic composition, posed problems in the way of governance. With Sikhs accounting for only 7 per cent of the population as against 50 per cent Muslims & 42 per cent Hindus, Ranjit Singh was realistic about the situation that he could neither deny Sikhs considerable authority under Sikh rule nor deny the others a representation. Had he been nature vindictive, a religious bigot, or obsessed with his own exalted status, he could have not achieved what he did had he not been realistic.
- b) Ranjit Singh was not unaware of British concerns about Napoleon's victories in Europe & the distinct possibility of his making plans to annex India as a French possession. If Ranjit Singh was right as well as realistic in his assessment, then the British would prefer a strong Sikh state to hold the enemy at bay. So, he was keen to turn the French threat to his advantage.
- c) His acute sense of realism is again evident in the remark he is said to have made on seeing a map of India with the areas under British control in red, telling his top commanders that *sub laal ho jayega* 'the whole map will be red one day'. For he recognized Britain's limitless resources, the range & variety of its weapons, the efficiency of its armed forces & the degree to which it could quickly augment fivefold whatever it needed.
- d) After his successful conquests of the misls, Lahore, Amritsar, Kasur & Multan, he & his generals also planned a strategy for taking Kashmir, however he returned home to Lahore towards the end of December 1813. He was fully aware that the strength of his forces did not allow him to spread them too far. If Ranjit

Singh remained unvanquished throughout his lifetime, even as the British conquered some of the Indian rulers & states including the mighty Mughals, it was because of a clear-headed acceptance of his own limitations.

### **3) Intelligence**

***“My sword procures me all the distinction I desire.” Maharaja Ranjit Singh***

Sometimes, the difference between effectiveness and failure lies in how expertly a tool is used. Many writers have been giving credit for some of Ranjit Singh’s dazzling military victories to the European officers serving under him. But, in fact, these officers were recruited in 1822, & much before that, many hard-fought campaigns, using forces that used plain weapons had been won. Hence, bigger and better doesn’t guarantee success. Intelligence, however, can turn an apparent disadvantage into a win. A well trained operator with a simple tool can be much more effective than a less well trained operator with an expensive, more impressive tool.

- a) The intensity of Ranjit Singh’s intelligence can be well gauged by his hesitation to assume the formal title of Maharaja. His political acumen is well illustrated in the compromise he made between becoming a Maharaja & remaining a peasant leader. He drew his authority not from titles, but from his qualities of leadership. No building or monument bore his name, he never possessed either a throne or a crown, there is hardly any mention of Ranjit Singh’s coronation in any state archives, in Punjab, Lahore or in the National Archives of India in New Delhi & the seal of government likewise bore no reference to him. These conventions were a complete departure from the accepted traditions of oriental courts & he acknowledged no earthly superiority.
- b) In 1803, while the British were debating whether the river Jamuna or the river Sutlej should be the dividing line between the British & the Sikh sphere of control, Ranjit Singh grabbed the opportunity he needed & set about straightening out some Phulkian(misl) states. While he shrewdly kept the talks with Charles Metcalfe (British representative to conduct negotiations) in progress, he made sure that they were held while he was on the move because the obvious message tactic sent to the Phulkian chief’s was that the British were a part of Ranjit Singh’s designs on them.
- c) Ranjit Singh again demonstrates his uncanny intelligence by employing methods to spy & assess accurately than most the threat the British would eventually pose to the Sikh kingdom. Taking the advantage of the presence of general Lake’s troops on the Beas, he paid a secret visit to the English camp, & noted ‘the machine-drill of the sepoy battalions, the mobility of the Company’s artillery, & the solidity of the British regiments, horse & foot’, which helped him to develop his own insights into their moves, motives & methodology.

### **4) Sense of responsibility**

It is one thing to make decisions but it is entirely a different scenario to live with those decisions. Whether it was the decision to abandon the citizens of his empire south of River Sutlej or including the centuries old untouchables into the army; once a commitment has been made, it has to be following to the letter. Similarly, in business ,on failing a leader or a manager must accept the responsibility for the failure, learn from it and try again. Similarly on succeeding it is important to reward the team and give them all the credit.

- a) Ranjit Singh took it upon himself to safeguard the trade routes in Kashmir. According to Sir Griffin, ‘Before Ranjit Singh took possession of the valley, her trade routes were unsafe & the costly shawls were often looted en route by the robbers. The Maharaja made special arrangements to safeguard the goods of the traders. The trade routes were made safe to the extent that highway robberies became a thing of the past.... The longest route was from Lahore to Petersburg via Kashmir.’
- b) He had a keen sense of responsibility towards all aspects of Punjab, whether it was in developing Punjab’s crafts & their exports, patronage of the arts, creating a unique coinage, sustaining the state’s environment , or giving its citizens a sense of security & ensuring the safety of travelers on its highways, nothing escaped his attention.
- c) Though himself unlettered, the Maharaja knew the importance of education. There were about four thousand schools belonging to different communities scattered over the length and breadth of his kingdom, with about one lac and twenty thousand students. These schools were mostly attached to Gurdwaras, Mosques and Temples.

### **5) Self Confidence & Communication Skills**

The dynamic business world today has no dearth of tricky situations where a manager will need to take tough decisions which don’t comply with the regular stance. Managers today can take hints from the conduct of

Maharaja Ranjit Singh & the way he handled situations with confidence & captivating communication skills which could have made him or break him.

- a) There is no dearth of instances where Ranjit Singh has shown his remarkable self-confidence. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was an intelligently aggressive person and this is more than clear from his numerous victories. As long as this Maharaja was alive the British had a formidable rival in India. In fact it is widely accepted by experts that the Maharaja even had the capability of defeating the British. In establishing his sway over these formidable people, Ranjit Singh succeeded with his self-confidence & will-power where many other colonial powers in this part of the world had often faced grave problems.
- b) When the chieftains gathered at Amritsar & planned to run away to the hills following the attack by Shah Zaman, it was Ranjit Singh's will power & excellent communication skills that turned the scales & many chiefs agreed to support him & hence sowed the seeds of the first Sikh Empire.

**6) Humanist & empathy**

*Never was so large an empire founded by one man with so little criminality.*

**Henry t. Prinsep on Maharaja Ranjit Singh**

Ranjit Singh proved himself consistently as a leader under whose rule the citizens could live in peace & tranquility. It was under his leadership that the Sikh Empire flourished like never before. A successful manager can take a cue from the following examples in which Maharaja Ranjit Singh highlights the relevance of personal supervision, showing empathy while winning, working in a global multicultural environment and benefits of employing democratic leadership style.

- a) Ranjit Singh's first move on occupying Lahore was to issue an order to his officers & troops that they were to treat the people of the city with courtesy & consideration, & that failure to obey this order as also any attempt at plunder would bring severe punishment. Ranjit Singh himself rode through Lahore's streets to assure the citizens of their personal safety & the safety of their property. And this gesture reminiscent of Alexander's treatment of the defeated King Porus, he made certain that Sardar Chet Singh, the defeated Bhangi ruler of Lahore, would not only be treated with full respect but also given a handsome grant of land.
- b) Ranjit Singh ensured that the religious & social festivals that a multi-cultural society like India observes throughout the year could be celebrated by people of all beliefs. And so he made it a rule that his senior ministers, governors & eminent citizens, including himself, should try to attend as many festivals as they could.
- c) He never punished a criminal with death even under circumstances of aggravated offence. Humanity indeed, or rather tenderness for life, was a trait in the character of Ranjit Singh. Among the notable traits of Ranjit Singh's character were his kindness and the total absence of malice, cruelty or vindictiveness, these being so uncommon in the context of his times.
- d) In 1833, despite a severe famine, Kanwar Sher Singh brought back large sums of money as revenue from Kashmir. Ranjit Singh was not pleased, & ordered thousands of sacks of wheat & provisions to be sent to Kashmir for the starving people, to be distributed from mosques & temples.

**7) Selecting a good team**

The placing of the right person, at the right job & at the right time is a continuous challenge faced by managers today. Ranjit Singh made sure that the men he chose from different faiths, beliefs & persuasions served him well.. The vastness of his empire made it even more prudent for him to place trustworthy & capable people in-charge of various districts of the empire. Eg. He choose an able & trusted man to take charge of Peshawar, General Hari Singh Nalwa. Dina Nath became the finance minister, a far-sighted, intelligent & well-educated, & proved to be hard-working & loyal. He appointed misr Ramdayal for his day to day affairs with people. Fateh Singh Ahluwalia guided on army matters. During the same periods darbar attracted the Fakir brothers who held high offices under Ranjit Singh.

**8) Ability to motivate people around**

*"eh Attock uhna lai atak hai, jehna de dillan wich atak hai" (This river Attock is an obstacle for those, who have obstacles in their hearts) Maharaja Ranjit Singh*

Leading in turbulent times is placing motivation firmly back on the leadership agenda. Today's managers understand the necessity of how their leadership style affects motivation and ultimately the delivery of business performance. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's ability to motivate made him rise from the status of petty chieftain to become the most powerful Indian ruler of his times.

- a) Many famous folk stories about Maharaja portray a leader and the inspiration Maharaja Ranjit Singh was. In one famous incident, when Maharaja was about to cross the badly flooded river near Attock (now in Pakistan

and called Kabul River). One of Maharaja's generals reported this fact to Maharaja, saying that the river cannot be crossed and it is now an Atak (an obstacle in Hindi) for us. Maharaja retorted "eh Attock uhna lai atak hai, jehna de dillan wich atak hai" or "This river Attock is an obstacle for those, who have obstacles in their hearts", then crossed the river successfully. The army and other generals followed his lead.

b) All through his life he had been a source of motivation both for the citizens of his empire & his soldiers. his ability to motivate people of different sects & cultures to move together as one made him the first Indian in a thousand years to stem the tides of invasion.

### **9) Ability to stand against critics**

Today's managers are exposed to external influences and pressures that are less predictable and more quickly come and go. Leading change requires managers to cope with this higher level of complexity. It also means that they, as part of their job, will almost inevitably face criticism in many occasions. Successful managers are aware of this and deal with criticism constructively & see it as a normal part of their role. Observing closely the way Maharaja Ranjit Singh dealt with criticism throughout his life, it can be concluded that he rather used criticism as a fuel for improvement.

- a) Ranjit Singh stood against critics from the day he became the chief of the Sukerchakia misl till the day his eyes were shut for eternity. 'When he first stood in his father's place,' wrote a British author nearer to Ranjit Singh's time than our own, 'everything was against him. He was beset by enemies, by doubtful friends, false allies & open foes.' He had more critics than allies in his surroundings. Whether it was the common man or the army or the chieftains or the courtiers; he has faced his critics boldly & also proved them wrong in more than one way.
- b) For the first time in the Indian history a landmark was created. Mazahbis, the centuries old untouchables of the Hindu society, far from being discriminated against, became a regular component of Ranjit Singh's army. Ranjit Singh was criticized for including them into the army, such that the Hindu Hill Rajputs refused to cooperate with him on account of his giving equality to the lower castes but later they ceased to have any compunction in working and fighting side by side with them.

## **III. FINDINGS**

1. It is evident from the research that democratic leadership is the most relevant & accepted form of leadership style & can help managers yield desired results.
2. Lack of education may prove to be a biggest handicap for any leader. But one thing can certainly be said that the handicap can be overcome by the leader with all his astuteness & prowess. So was it with Maharaja Ranjit Singh.
3. The importance given to the physical appearance by various management thinkers is proved wrong by Ranjit Singh's not so attractive physical appearance & indeed the lackluster physical appearance was substituted by his charismatic leadership.
4. Whether it is the present, the past or the future, a leader whether in the office or on the battle field will have to work with people of diverse backgrounds. In such a scenario, the communal constitution of organizations cannot be viewed in isolation & secularism becomes the pivot around which the successful leadership traits of a leader hang.
5. A manager has to prove himself again and again by pulling off some key victories. A manager is not expected to live in the achievements of the past. Ranjit Singh proved himself consistently as a leader under whose rule the citizens could live in peace & tranquility.
6. The importance of the SWOT analysis even by a king can go a long way in deciding the success or failure of a leader. No matter how strong or rooted the position of a manager be, one thing not to be taken for granted is overlooking one's weaknesses & undermining threats.
7. Managing change is extremely crucial for a manager or a leader in today's cutthroat dynamic business environment. Storms make oaks take deeper root, the same is required of managers today as the winds of change can swipe them off the radar if they don't initiate & manage change as Ranjit Singh did over 250 years ago with accepting secularism, training his army of western lines, etc.
8. Criticism can be used by managers as a fuel for improvement & can also be considered a disguised blessing.
9. Motivation again reinforced itself as the brute force that can turn the worse tides in favour of the manager. The managers can take a cue from Ranjit Singh exemplary ways of motivating his countrymen in difficult times.
10. Selecting a good team can go a long way in deciding the success or failure of the team leader which has been well justified by Ranjit Singh.

11. Communication skills of a leader or manager in difficult times can play a vital role in turning the team in the right direction as again illustrated by Ranjit Singh.

#### IV. CONCLUSION : LEGACY & AFTERMATH

In today's ultra-competitive business world, executives are pressured to deploy all the weapons in their arsenals to stay ahead of the opposition and win the day. The need to tap the wisdom and experience of some of history's greatest leaders is more today than ever before. Ranjit Singh may be long gone, but his achievements still stand. There is a lot that businesses today can imbibe from the military leadership of today & especially from the past.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh died in 1839, after a reign of nearly forty years but within days & months of Ranjit Singh's death, his empire began to break down. Created by the military & administrative genius of one man, it crumbled into powder when the spirit which gave it life was withdrawn; & the inheritance of the Sikh Empire passed into the hands of the English.

When on 14 March 1849 Chattar Singh & Raja Sher Singh Attariwala surrendered to General Gilbert near Rawalpindi, it was the saddest day in the history of a proud & zestful people who had lived & fought all their lives according to their beliefs & with a rare sense of confidence & self-esteem. There is a moving account that captures the moment of Sikh grief & deep inner hurt when an old veteran of the Sikh army threw down his sword in disgust at the surrender ceremony with the words : '*Aaj Ranjit Singh mar gaya.*' ('Ranjit Singh has finally died today'). The wasting of his legacy was a great loss to his successors & to India, because a man like Ranjit Singh rarely emerges in the galaxy of great leaders. To quote the bard of the times, Shah Mohammad who in his epic book '*Kissa Jungnama Singhan te Firangiaan*' says,

*"Shah mohamadda ik sarkar baajon  
Faujaan jit ke ant nu haariyaan ne"*  
(o Shah Mohammad but for the Sarkar  
the armies lost a winning battle)

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