

Maharaja Gulab Singh

(1792- 1857)

232nd Birth Anniversary

On the auspicious fifth day of the month of Katak of the solar year one thousand eight hundred and forty-nine *Bikrami*, corresponding to 21st October, A.D. 1792, in a village called Anderwah was born Maharaja Gulab Singh who was arguably one of the greatest personalities of 19th century in Asian history. The founder of one of the largest princely states of Jammu and Kashmir, his life history is a brilliant saga of a continuous chain of bravery, courage, chivalrous deeds, and glorious exploits.

The blood of the Raghuvanshi clan flowed in his veins through his paternal side. Thus, he had hereditary claims to valor and military distinction which started manifesting themselves quite early, along with his gifted ability to transcend the apparent difficulties of his position, time, and space. At a very young age, Gulab Singh chose to follow the tough and strict regimentation of a soldier's life, and, at the tender age of sixteen, he distinguished himself in the defense of Jammu against a force dispatched by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the battle of Gumat against the force dispatched by Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Imbued with the spirit of adventure he decided to test his fortune outside Jammu. This brought him to the famous Lahore Darbar. In 1809 he became part of the army of Lahore Darbar. Within a few years of his recruitment, he led many successful campaigns for his master and played a key role in the consolidation and management of the Sikh kingdom. His

distinguished service during the siege of Multan in 1819 and his subjugation of Mian Dido, who controlled the hill around Jammu, established his credentials as a great warrior and also brought him close to Maharaja Ranjit Singh. In 1820 he was awarded a Jagir worth Rs.40,000 annually near Jammu. Soon he was allowed to have an army of his own. Having an army of his own was just the beginning of the realization of a larger imperial dream that young Gulab Singh seemed to have nurtured deep down in his heart. He soon conquered Kishtwar and Rajori for the Lahore Darbar. Apart from the professional rise, he, however, also rose in the esteem of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He was no longer considered to be a mere brave and skilled soldier; now he also became a trusted aid and advisor of Maharaja Ranjit Singh on matters of strategic importance and statecraft. In 1822, as a reward for his services, he earned the position of the hereditary Raja of Jammu with an annual allowance of three lakhs of rupees. He was coronated on June 17, 1822, as the Raja of Jammu by none other than the Maharaja of the Sikh Empire, the Sher-e-Punjab Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Thus, within no time, Gulab Singh rose from the position of an ordinary soldier, to become the most valued 'Jewel in the crown of Lahore Darbar'.

This was also the time when Gulab Singh started working towards the realization of his imperial ambition. He soon engaged himself once again in the political affairs of the North West region. With his gifted ability to recognize great military generals and administrators, he chose generals like General Zorawar Singh, General Baj Singh, and Mehta Basti Ram who conquered and consolidated Ladakh and Tibet as a part of his political domain.

It all started in 1834, Gulab Singh sent his ablest general, Zorawar Singh Kahluria, with 4,000 infantrymen to conquer the territory between Jammu and the Tibetan border, and by 1841 this general was able to advance up the Indus Valley into Tibet, capture the province of Purig, advanced into Sinkiang and **Bashahr and reached Takiakot**. There also came a time when Maharaja Gulab Singh was politically marginalized, deserted by friends, and his entire family decimated, Yet Gulab Singh was down but not out. Under his order, Zorawar continued his advance which made the colonial officials quite nervous.

However, the political configuration that followed the death of Ranjit Singh in June 1839, was not in his favor and now he prepared himself to play a quite different role in the unfolding history of the Punjab and Kashmir. By 1841 it was clear to the colonial authority that Gulab Singh was the only authority who could control the area.

Hard-core realist with a deep understanding of the changing canvas of politics, Gulab Singh could see the inevitability of the conflict between the remnants of the Lahore Durbar and the colonial authority. He, therefore, chose to maintain diplomatic neutrality. After the end of the Anglo- Sikh War, a treaty of Lahore was signed on March 9, 1846, in the negotiation of which Maharaja Gulab Singh played an important role. One of the provisions of the treaty was the reorganization of the Maharaja as an independent ruler by both the Khalsa power and the British government. Since Lahore Durbar was not in a position to pay the indemnity, they handed over to the Britishers the territories between the Beas and Indus rivers, including Kashmir and Hazra. Seven days after the Treaty of Lahore, on the 16th March 1846, Maharaja Gulab Singh

signed the Treaty of Amritsar, by the territories ceded by the Lahore Durbar, except Kulu and Mandi, were transferred to Gulab Singh along with the title of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir.