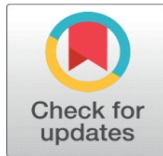
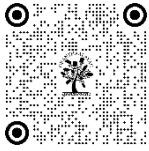


ECHOES OF TRADITION: THE GRAND BASANT FESTIVAL OF LAHORE DARBAR

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ABSTRACT

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, proudly known as Sher-i-Punjab (Lion of the Punjab), was one of the outstanding figures in Indian history. On 20 August 2003, a 22-foot-tall bronze statue of Maharaja Ranjit Singh was installed in the Parliament of India. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee unveiled the statue. In 2016, the town of St. Tropez in France unveiled the Maharaja's bronze statue as a mark of respect. In 2020, Maharaja Ranjit Singh was recently named the "Greatest Leader of All Time" in a British poll by 'BBC World Histories Magazine'. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a Sikh ruler and was known for his benevolence, valor, and care for his people. His rule in Punjab gave stability, harmony, progress, and prosperity to the society. He always identified himself with peasants and soldiers. He gave little importance to the crown and the throne. He did not assume the title of the king. He liked to be addressed by the plain and simple title of 'singh sahib' which applies to any member of the Sikh gentry. He refused to sit on the Mughal throne at Lahore and preferred to hold Darbar sitting in a cross-legged position in one or the other chair which did not have any semblance of royal throne. Sometimes, he held Darbar even in a more informal manner, sitting on a carpet and reclining on a velvet cushion. He referred to his government as khalsaji or sarkar khalsa. He was simply dressed in plain silk or pashmina in winter and white muslin in summer. He was firm about wearing his simple chieftain's turban and never adorned himself with any royal emblem on his turban. These habits of the Maharaja may also be attributed to his hailing from the tribal peasant stock and the impact upon him of the rural culture of the Punjab. He adopted liberal policies towards all religions and treated them with magnanimity. People of all religions equally reciprocated his warm interest in their religions. Their religious beliefs and practices were fully respected by the state and they had unstinted freedom to carry on their worship in any way they liked. He and his royal court (Lahore Darbar) participated in fairs and festivals of all, even those festivals which were strictly religious. He did not interfere in the well-established customs, rites, and practices of the people. Old traditions and practices were respected and followed. In the words of F.S. Waheeduddin, "There was complete religious harmony during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh". All the communities looked upon him not only as their protector but also as one of themselves. The Lahore Darbar has always been more than just a political center—it is a cultural and spiritual hub. It has been a venue for grand celebrations, such as lohri, basant, holi, dussehra, diwali, id-ul-fitr and shab-i-barat. The participation of the Maharaja and his Darbar in these festivals made them even more significant. In the Lahore darbar, the festival of Basant was observed with great pomp and show.

Keywords: Qazis, Muftis, Robes of Honour, Khalsa, Sarkar-I-Khalsa, Samadh, Mullazada, Maktab, Farrash, Munshis, Daftaries, Vakils, Campoo-I-Mualla, Nazars, and Mansab

1. INTRODUCTION

Basant a seasonal festival, takes place on the fifth day of the light half of the lunar month of *magh* (January-February). It is the harbinger of Spring when the weather begins to warm up and nature starts pulsating with new life, plants begin to sprout and blossom.ⁱ According to Hindu scriptures, *basant* is celebrated in honour of Saraswati, the Goddess of fine art and literature. It is also associated with the worship of Lord Vishnu, the God of preservation.ⁱⁱ *Basant* was observed with great rejoicing in the Punjab. Fields of mustard presented a unique and colourful sight in all the rural areas which looked like a newly wedded damsel resplendent in her gorgeous golden yellow. From the fact that the yellow leaves of the

mustard plants were in bloom, it was customary for all to attire in *basanti* (yellow colour clothes) and put some mustard seeds in their caps and turbans.ⁱⁱⁱ Yellow food or food mixed with saffron was specially prepared. The *vasant rag* or spring song was sung and its special virtue is said to be the giving of an impulse to the emotions of love and merriment.^{iv} Kites were flown and matches of kite flying were held. When the string of a kite was cut off, the sky echoed with cheers and the shouts of '*bo-kata*' from the winning side.^v In some places, the cattle's horns were painted and decorated. In a later period, cattle fairs were also held in Punjab.^{vi}

Basant was also associated with the martyrdom of Haqiqat Rai^{vii} in the Punjab who on this day laid down his life for not accepting Islam under coercion. A large fair of *basant* was held at his *samadh* near the village of Kot Khwaja Said and it was regarded as a place of pilgrimage.^{viii} The fair of *basant* was also held at the mausoleum of Madho Lal Husain in Baghwanpura about three miles from Lahore, near the Shalimar gardens.^{ix} Lal Husain was a holy man who wanted to make Madho his disciple. But in a few days, Madho expired and his parents approached Lal Husain to restore their son to life. Lal Husain agreed on the condition that if their son Madho came to life again, they should allow him to become his disciple. Madho was revived by the sacred blessings of Lal Husain. They lived for some time and finally died together. In commemoration of their death, a fair was held at their mausoleum.^x

Basant was celebrated with great *éclat* in the Lahore Darbar. The Maharaja ensured that all the chieftains, Sardars, *darbaris*, and soldiers wore yellow robes.^{xi} It is interesting to know why the Maharaja celebrated this festival at the mausoleum of Madho Lal Husain.^{xii} Men of floorings (*farrash*) were ordered to set up tents, screens, and canopies of yellow colour near the mausoleum.^{xiii} All the chieftains, *munshis*, *daftaries*, and *vakils* were given the order to present themselves at the mausoleum dressed in yellow robes, made of brocade, satin, and gold woven cloth. On this day royal orders were issued to the commandants of the 'Campoo-i-Mualla' (royal camp), horsemen, and platoons to put on yellow garments and stand in line beginning from Delhi gate to the mausoleum of Madho Lal Hussain.^{xiv}

On this day, at about the third quarter of the day, the Maharaja came out in yellow, on a huge elephant with great pomp and show, passed through the Delhi gate, and then went to the said mausoleum, surveying on the way the parade of the troops, entered his tent and took his seat in a golden chair under a well-set canopy.^{xv} In 1832, Mohan Lal, a traveler, who was a witness to the celebrations of *basant* and has described the festivities in the following words:

"The Maharaja's troops standing on the both sides of the road, forming a regular street, with their uniform basanti dress (of a yellow colour), to salute the King of the Punjab who was apparelled likewise in a basanti dress, accompanied by his "European" guests, proceeded to the tents which were made of yellow silk and ornamented with pearls where he was received with the most extravagant demonstrations of joy, _____ "Long live the good liege of the five rivers!" was the general cry. By the trotting of elephants and horses, the dust arose so thick that one could not see".^{xvi}

To illustrate the pomp and show of *basant* celebrations further, an interesting description can be quoted from Baron Charles Hugel, a German traveller (1836) in the following words.

"The basant, literally the Spring, is a festival celebrated yearly in upper Hindustan and the Punjab. The sirsyas then covering the whole of the country with its blossoms. ----- Large crowd had formed round a talking or a singing faqir, a juggler or an astrologer, a vender of toys or sweetmeats. At another spot, grown up men were running about the fields with kites and multitudes of persons were seen following some musicians who were beating their tamtams and blowing horns. One part of the court was divided from the rest by a kanat or canvas screen and there sat Ranjit Singh in an armchair under a large tent of Kashmir stuff, yellow like the carpet, himself and every thing about it. ___ Large quantities of sirsyas and other yellow flowers were scattered about here and there. _____ As the festival began, all had taken their seats. _____ Each person being expected to offer some present to the Maharaja. On his (Maharaja Ranjit Singh) right hand sat Kharak Singh, on the left, the favourite, Raja Hira Singh _____ and more to the left Sultan Mohammad Khan and his son who brought with them a present in gold. Behind the king stood the Jamadar, Suchet Singh and General Ventura while in the background were a number of the inferior state officers. Next came Sardars, Rajas and Khans from different provinces, all bringing gold. Most of the Muslim Sardars sat with their left hand resting on the ground. The garments they wore were most expensive and gorgeous, those of Ranjit Singh only excepted, who, as usual, was dressed in his plain wrapping-gown. The dancing girls were introduced all in yellow, and to them the Maharaja sent the silver money which had been presented to him".^{xvii}

The above descriptions of the foreign travellers give a clear picture of the Lahore Darbar. Yellow was the colour of the Darbar on *basant*. The visitors were expected to take their seats according to their status and present themselves before the Maharaja with *nazars*. On this occasion all presented *nazars* to the Maharaja and in return received robes of honour according to their status.^{xviii} The Maharaja also scrutinized the cavalry, the infantry, and the artillery that were uniformly dressed in yellow and felt very pleased to receive the salute of his forces.^{xix} At night dancing girls engaged themselves in singing and dancing and received handsome rewards.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's enduring cultural impact, which inspires reverence and respect globally, makes him an eternal symbol of leadership and unity. Regardless of his subjects' caste or creed, Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a kind and compassionate leader who constantly looked out for their well-being. He believed wholeheartedly in the widespread concord and collaboration between Muslims and Hindus that upheld peace and prosperity. The celebration of *basant* at the *mazar* of Madho Lal Hussain by the Maharaja and his visit to Katas Raj and to the *samadhi* of Haqiqat Rai signified his magnanimous approach towards the events of cultural importance and his profound reverence for all that was holy and spiritual irrespective of what religion it pertained to.^{xx}

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ *Gazetteer of Lahore District, 1883-84*, 60; A.H. Bingley, *The Sikhs*, Punjab Languages Department, Patiala, 1970, 110; S.S. Bedi, *Folklore of the Punjab*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1971, 71.
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- ^{vi} C.H. Buck, *Faith, Fairs and Festivals of India*, Asian Publication Service, New Delhi, 1977, 80.
- ^{vii} *Haqiqat Rai, the Martyr, was a son of Lala Bhag Mal Puri of Sialkot. Haqiqat Rai was a promising lad of fourteen and like the sons of all those who lived by the pen, he was attending the maktab for acquiring knowledge of all the important branches of learning. In the maktab one day, he entered into a discussion with a mullazada on a point relating to the composition of verses. Silenced by a cogent argument on the point, the mullazada accused Haqiqat Rai of disrespect to the Prophet of Islam. The musalmans of the city supported the mullazada without a second thought and demanded that Haqiqat Rai should be punished for his blasphemy. Haqiqat Rai's parents and the Hindus of the city begged forgiveness on his behalf but they were given only two alternatives: either Haqiqat Rai should accept Islam or capital punishment. Bhag Mal bribed the corrupt officials and maulavis and succeeded in getting the case transferred to the court of the provincial governor, Khan Bahadur Zakariya Khan, in Lahore. When Haqiqat Rai accompanied the escorting soldiers to Lahore, a large number of Muslims from Sialkot and other places also started for Lahore to ensure that one of the alternatives suggested by them was adopted. On the way to Lahore, Haqiqat Rai was not allowed to ride a horse. In Lahore itself, the ulama, the qazis, the muftis, and other respectable people were persuaded by the mullahs of Sialkot to accept their version of the situation. Zakariya Khan listened to all the witnesses and, from their conflicting evidence, concluded that Haqiqat Rai was innocent. His advisers suggested, however, that it would be highly impolitic to go against the current Muslim opinion. Zakariya Khan suggested to the boy that he may accept Islam but he curtly replied: If I become a musulman will I live for ever.? He was then offered the high mansab of three thousand, with a large jagir. But he did not care for these earthly prizes. Zakariya Khan left him then to the discretion of the maulavis. They decreed the punishment of death. Bhag Mal requested that his son be kept in custody for one night so that he may be persuaded to accept Islam. This request was granted. At night he tried to argue with his son, saying that Islam too was good in its way; in any case, life was precious. Haqiqat Rai underlined the narrowness of the creed of the orthodox Muslims and the relentlessness of their hostility to others, in contrast with the catholicity of the Persian poets. He told his father that he was not going to accept Islam. The ring of finality in his decision was so evident that his father and others departed in despair. In the morning, he was stoned nearly to death when he was beheaded by a soldier out of compassion. The Hindus prayed that they may be allowed to cremate him according to Hindu rites. Their prayer was granted. Every Hindu contributed one thing or another towards the arrangements. A flower seller in Lahore sold flowers worth one hundred and twenty*

rupees in half a ghari. The garland which he used to sell for half a dam fetched him more than six rupees on that day such was the feeling among the Hindus of Lahore for the martyr. A small samadh was built over the place of his cremation. People hold a fair there on the fifth of every month and regard it as a place of pilgrimage. In Sialkot itself, his father made a marhi in his house. That too has become a place of pilgrimage. J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga, (tr. and eds.), *Early Nineteenth Century Punjab (a part of Ganesh Das's Char Bagh-i-Punjab)*, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 1975, 152-154

- viii Agra Sethi, *Var Haqiqat Rai* (ed.) Ganda Singh, Khalsa College, Amritsar, 1946, 12; J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga tr. and eds., *Early Nineteenth Century Punjab*, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 1975, 154; H.R. Gupta, *History of the Sikhs*, Vol. V, 451.
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- xv *Ibid.*, 242.
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