

SIR GANGA RAM: LIFE AND HIS CONTRIBUTION

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ABSTRACT: The proposed theme of present work is to life study Sir Ganga Ram, one of the great personalities in the history of modern India. Besides being the first modern engineer in India. Sir Ganga Ram is also known as the “Father of Modern Lahore.” He was **born in** April 1851 at village Mangtanwala. His life showed how individual talent could flower under the Raj. He is remembered as the builder of Lahore who worked as an Executive Engineer in the Punjab Public Works department. He worked largely for the welfare of common people of Punjab focussing on education and health. However, what he really strived to achieve goes much beyond his contribution as a builder or a benefactor. He tried to revolutionize the Indian agriculture as well. Sir Ganga Ram was a great philanthropist.

Rai Bahadur Ganga Ram Aggarwal was born in April 1851 in the house of Daulat Ram, a Junior sub inspector in the police at village *Mangtanwala* about forty miles from Lahore and fourteen miles from *Nankana Sahib* (now in Pakistan).ⁱ Strategically it stands on the road which formed the old imperial highway of the Mughals connecting Delhi the ‘heart of the empire’, with the far- flung outposts of the north-west.ⁱⁱ Daulat Ram, with his utmost devotion to the Sikh Gurus, decided to settle in *Amritsar* and became a copyist in the court.ⁱⁱⁱ Sir Ganga Ram born of poor parents rose to be one of the richest men in India.^{iv}

Little is known about Sir Ganga Ram’s early life except that he was a brilliant boy and very thoughtful. Sir Ganga Ram received his primary and secondary education at Amritsar. At the age of four, the little boy was deemed old enough to go to private school near Durbar Sahib where arithmetic, calligraphy and Persian was taught.^v Ganga Ram was very good in studies, did different things in the life with passion and zeal. Since his childhood, he was a very disciplined and serious kind of personality.^{vi} Observing his radiant and peaceful disposition, Baba Bishan Singh, in whose shrine Daulat Ram was living, suggested the latter to take good care of him and predicted that “by the grace of Waheguru, the child will be to his age what Vikramaditya was to his own times.” The words were too flattering for a junior police officer to believe, but he took those as an expression of the solicitude and the goodwill, the old sage had always shown towards him.^{vii}

In the second half of nineteenth century tremendous transformation was taking place in India, education being the primary concern. Punjab was no exception. The idea of education was not new to the Punjab. Punjab's three main communities namely Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs had their own system of education. Such a system was based essentially on the religious tenets of each community.^{viii} The chief merit of the indigenous system of elementary schools was their adaptability to local environment and vitality and popularity they had earned by centuries of existence under a variety of economic conditions or political vicissitudes.^{ix}

After the annexation of Punjab in 1849, the indigenous system of education received the crippling blow.^x Though, an education administrator, G.W. Leitner, tried to revive the indigenous system, English elbowed out the classical languages.^{xi} In 1854 the English officials working in Punjab had prepared a scheme for initiating a new education system.^{xii} The object of this new education was to make Indian officers intellectually and morally fit to perform their duties with efficiency and probity.^{xiii} Charles Woods in his famous Despatch declared that "this knowledge will teach the natives of India the marvelous results of the employment of labour and capital, rouse them to emulate it in the development of the vast resources of country, guide them in their efforts".^{xiv} In the words of Parkash Tandon, the new government with a set of officers, "settled down to the task of building an administration, giving the province a new judiciary and laid the foundation of a peaceful and prosperous countryside".^{xv}

The principal educational aims and the fundamental principles of the educational policy of the government had already been formulated and education had already made rapid strides in other provinces.^{xvi} The British educational policy was designed to achieve imperial agenda of cultural transformation of the Punjab with a view to strengthen roots of the British rule.^{xvii} Old traditional system of education gradually disappeared and the new Western system of education which aimed at the spread of western knowledge through the medium of English language was firmly started in the province of the Punjab.^{xviii}

Slowly but steadily, an English educated small middle class emerged and began to enter the government services.^{xix} Ganga Ram was also product of this new social formation. He was sent to a school at Katra Ahluwalia, where he progressed so well that he covered two classes in one year. Next year, he repeated the same trick and jumped over two classes. Due to poverty and hardships of the family, Ganga Ram used to assist his father in his work and he failed in the matriculation examination of the Calcutta University but he succeeded in his second attempt.^{xx} Like many migrants, Ganga Ram turned to the city of Lahore as it had emerged a major economic centre.^{xxi} He joined the Government College Lahore in 1869.^{xxii} The College was founded in 1864

in the large *haveli* of Raja Dhyan Singh the Dogra.^{xxiii} The massive building with its carved doors and historic associations was princely in the eyes of the young student fresh from the narrow lanes of Amritsar.

Once, Ganga Ram went to meet his family priest who was employed in the office of Executive Engineer in Lahore. He had to wait for some time and he took his seat in the Engineer's chair, which was a mighty seat of power. The priest was horrified at his impertinence. He roughly ordered the boy to vacate the chair and Ganga Ram replied that "Why are you worrying about this chair? I shall occupy it one day in my own right". Afterwards, Ganga Ram acted as though he had found the star to which his wagon could be hitched. Almost subconsciously, he turned his mind towards developing the possibilities of engineering.^{xxiv}

After passing Government College Lahore, he qualified for admission in the Thomson Engineering College, Roorkee with scholarship of Rs. 50 per month in 1871.^{xxv} In the North West Provinces a small engineering class was already going at Saharanpur since 1845. After the end of First Sikh War, large workshops were established at Roorke for constructing the upper Ganges canal. As need for trained engineers arose, it was then only an Engineering College was started at Roorke in 1847 on the suggestion of Mr. James Thomson (lieutenant Governor of the province).^{xxvi} While students in the engineering schools studied basic functional parameters of building design, including structural mechanics, construction, material science etc., and little attention was paid to the more advanced issues of formal aesthetics, architectural history and theory. Thus, any interest shown by colonial engineers in acquiring basic education in architectural designs was welcomed and supported and most of the provincial engineers were trained at the prestigious college of Roorkee.^{xxvii} Sir Ganga Ram was the first Indian to graduate from this college. After two years it was in 1873 that Ganga Ram appeared in his final examination, which he passed, standing third in order of merit, and topping the list in the project paper. He got gold medal in 1873, a much-prized distinction which was instrumental in securing for him almost immediate recognition.

After passing out from the college in 1873 he was first posted at Lahore. He was appointed as an Assistant Engineer and he served his apprenticeship under R.B. Kanhaya Lal who was incharge of building and roads branch of the Provincial Public Works Department. In a couple of year the young assistant engineer had sufficiently impressed his superiors with his energy, resourcefulness and power of organisation.^{xxviii} In January 1876, Prince of Wales (afterwards King Edward VII) visited Lahore and Lahore fort.^{xxix} Ganga Ram was considered to be best officer to be put in charge of all the arrangements at Lahore for the reception of the august visitor. This was a rare opportunity to prove his capabilities, and Ganga Ram's natural

gifts and knowledge of details served him so well to discharge his duties that within two years he was again singled out and his services were requisitioned on special duty for the Imperial Assemblage at Delhi. This appointment was probably the cause of his selection for more important duties in connection with the royal *Durbars* which were held in Delhi.^{xxx} These *Durbars* were important events to glorify the empire and it was in keeping with the Indian tradition of dazzling celebrations at the time of the coronation of a new ruler to mark his sovereignty over his subjects.^{xxxi}

The city of Lahore owes many of its architectural wonders to Ganga Ram, who designed and supervised the construction of various buildings. Notable amongst them include Government College's chemistry building, Lahore Museum, General Post Office, Punjab High Court, Aitchison College, Mayo School of Arts, Mayo Hospital, Mall Road on Lahore, Sir Ganga Ram High School, Ganga Ram Hospital and Model Town amongst many other projects. He was also responsible for constructing large portions of Lahore's paved streets and drainage systems.^{xxxii} Through his private funds he built Ganga Ram Hospital, and Renala Khurd Power House. The Ganga Ram Trust continues to operate the Ganga Ram Hospital. He spent a considerable amount on building shelter homes for the widows. In transport sector he set up Ghoda Train (Anokhi Sawari).^{xxxiii}

In the first Delhi *Durbar* Sir Ganga Ram was given the responsibility to build the amphitheatre.^{xxxiv} He built a semicircular stepped amphitheatre, nearly eight hundred feet in diameter which encircled the raised throne for the Viceroy at its centre.^{xxxv} The culminating scene of the *Durbar* on 1st January, 1877 was one of the great splendour.^{xxxvi} Impressed by his work, Lord Ripon forwarded a novel request of Ganga Ram in 1882 to travel to England to study architecture and practical engineering.^{xxxvii} There, for two years, Ganga Ram was to get special training in water works and drainage. He was profoundly moved by the high standard of living of the working classes of England compared with their less fortunate brothers in India, and here he began to develop modernistic attitude to poverty and the solution of economic problem which later on brought him in disagreement with the handicraft schemes of Mahatma Gandhi.^{xxxviii} After he returned back, Ganga Ram was appointed to supervise the water supply and drainage system of Peshawar.

Sir Ganga Ram was nominated as member of the Royal Commission on Agriculture which had been set up towards the end of 1925 under the Chairmanship of Marquis of Linlithgow and early in 1927 the Commission decided to meet in England to formulate its findings and recommendations. In 1927 Sir Ganga Ram travelled to London despite the fact that he was very

averse for undertaking the voyage as he wished prior to the journey: “I shall not last long and do not want to die in a foreign land”.^{xxxix} He died suddenly due to heart failure in London on the intervening night of 10th and 11th July 1927 at the age of about seventy six years.^{xl} Sir Ganga Ram’s cremation ceremony took place at the Golders Green Crematorium and it was attended by dignitaries including many notable Englishman.^{xli}

His body was cremated with Hindu customs and ashes were brought back to India by Rai Bahadur Sewakram, the eldest son of Sir Ganga Ram.^{xlii} Main portion of these ashes were thrown in the waters of the river Ganga and the remaining ashes were then taken to Lahore. A large gathering of people including the Deputy Commissioner received Sir Ganga Ram’s family at the Lahore Railway station. The ashes were taken to the Town Hall Compound, where thousands of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims were awaiting them. The ashes were then placed on a bier bedecked with flowers, carried in procession through the city followed by a large crowd of people of all communities.^{xliii} About ten thousand people attended the ceremony at the Lahore and the crowds chanted ‘*gharibon key wali ki jai*’ (Long Live the Friend of the Poor).^{xliv}

In the words of Sir Malcolm Hailey, the Governor of Punjab, “he won like a hero and gave like a saint”.^{xlv} Sir Malcolm Hailey presided over a crowded public meeting at the Gaiety Theatre where a resolution was passed recording the “deep sense of loss which the Punjab has sustained at the death of Sir Ganga Ram, a great pioneer in agriculture industry, education, and a noble philanthropist who died far from home serving to the cause of agricultural progress”. Sardar Joginder Singh, Minister for Agriculture said that Sir Ganga Ram’s last message to India was that “Every rupee spent on carrying out the recommendations of the Royal Commission of Agriculture would bring a thousand fold returns”. The Marquis of Linlithgow and his colleagues on the Royal Commission of Agriculture passed a resolution recording their deep sense of loss at the death of Sir Ganga Ram. The Resolution stated that “his bold and enterprising mind and wide experience and wisdom in Counsel were assets of the greatest value and have already left their indelible mark upon the deliberations of the Commission”.^{xlvi} Sir Ganga Ram’s death was also mourned by the widows for whom he had been the means of a happy and cheerful domestic life; by hundreds of others who were being trained for earning an independent livelihood and by the numerous men; women and children who had benefitted from his institutions or works of private charity.^{xlvii}

CONCLUSION

Sir Ganga Ram is fondly remembered as an engineer and as the builder of modern Lahore but he devoted his life to the service of the common man. He was born of poor parents, he rose to be one of the richest men in India. But his riches were not meant for himself or his dear and near ones alone. About Ganga Ram's early life except that he was a brilliant boy, very thoughtful. Ganga Ram showed great interest in his studies and worked far more intensely than a normal child of his age. Lahore of Ganga Ram's college days was full of the thriving life. Even the narrow streets of the then old city of Lahore were invested with an exciting personality. Ganga Ram meant a new and wider life. The more Ganga Ram thought about own future, the more the idea of a special destiny imprinted itself on his mind. His period of service had now lengthened to twelve years in 1885 when he was posted to Lahore as Assistant Engineer, this being the first time that his early dream showed signs of fulfilling itself. He construction of the new Buildings in Lahore. He represented the class of Indians which was well rooted in the Indian traditions, always respected and revered those but at the same time were open to the modern and scientific ideas. His career presents an example of the adaption of Indian tradition with the colonial perceptions and sensibilities

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