



Patiala :

The royal herald of Punjabi pride



PICS: SOMEN SENGUPTA

By **SOMEN SENGUPTA**

Ever since Mughal administrative control started collapsing over the vast kingdom left by Aurangzeb in 1707, many provinces across the country started declaring independence and rulers of those places started behaving like independent rulers.

It was the time regional power started over taking Delhi and centralized rule died in India till the time it was reestablished by British East India Company in mid of 19th century. In south it was Nizam, while in west and east Marathas and Murshidqali Khan of Bengal-Bihar-Orissa who became almost as independent as Mughals.

Near to Delhi, in north the biggest landmass demarked by its language and culture was Punjab. Soon Punjab detached from Delhi and it all started from a small place named Patiala.

For a commoner, Patiala is famous for its large whisky peg, designer shoes and classical school of music. A lover of sports may add little more by saying it as the home of Sports Authority of India - the country's national sports training centre. However that is not all. It is here that the Sikh tasted their first independence from Islamic rulers and it is here where the light of knowledge sparked in modern time.

It all started in 1714 with a brave man named Baba Ala Singh whose father Chowdhury Ram Singh was blessed by Sikh Guru Govind Singh. By taking advantage of his position, Ala Singh converted 30 small villages into an independent kingdom after fighting many gory battles with Afghans, Marathas and Mughals. A cunning politician who cared little for ethics, Ala Singh did all that he could to protect his people and kingdom. In the IIIrd battle of Panipat, he joined as a partner of Ahmed Shah Abdali while also supplying food grain to Marathas. He soon founded a kingdom of his own out of nothing. After him his successors with their sheer hard work and military skill finally shaped the kingdom and it became totally independent from any outside rulers, even from Ranjit Singh the legendary warrior king of Punjab. With a treaty in 1809 with Lord Minto of East India Company, Patiala ensured its British protection from Sultej river to Yamuna river. It was enough to end Ranjit's dream to take over Patiala. As a mark of long lasting friendship, Patiala openly supported British in suppressing great Indian mutiny of 1857.

The city of Patiala in 19th century was the main political hub of a kingdom running from Shivalik in north to border of Rajasthan.

After the defeat of Marathas in 3rd battle of Panipat in 1761, entire Punjab was under threat of Afghani looters and it was the time city of Patiala got its first significant architecture in the name of Qila Mubarak.

Initially built as a mud fort, the structure was later set up by Baba Ala Singh in 1763 from the revenue collected from the traders passing Grand Trunk Road. This

gave a royal recognition to Patiala as an independent state after many years of non-stop struggle against Mughals, Afghans and Marathas. It finally got its place in history. In 1809, Royal family of Patiala even entered into a treaty to help British against Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the biggest icon of Punjab and that was the beginning of long friendship with British that lasted till 1947 when Maharaja of Patiala came forward as first princely state to sign Indian Government's instrument of accession. It resulted in Patiala state merging with Indian state of Punjab along with many other districts of eastern Punjab. Maharaja Bhupinder Singh from 1900 to 1939, for both good and bad reasons, made Patiala famous. His ardent love for cricket, polo, gems, automobiles, music and finest women of the world (not to mention his more than 80 children from various legitimate and illegitimate queens) made Patiala famous all over the globe as one of the most extraordinary Indian native state under British Union Jack. After independence, Patiala was the first Indian province to accept accession offer of Indian Govt and king of Patiala was honoured as chancellor of Chamber of Princes.

Till today, fort Qila Mubarak is the main archaeological attraction of Patiala town. The fort stands in the mid of city centre.

The old part of the fort made by Baba Ala Khan is known as Qila Andaroon, while the new modern part was done by Karam Singh where most of the buildings are standing now. The royal arched gate takes visitors inside a massive courtyard which is surrounded with magnificent palaces built in the blending of Islamic and Rajput school of architecture. The pillar, carnies, arches, *chatri*, *jharokha*, *jali* and royal gates were all constructed between 18th century to mid of 20th century till the time royal family shifted to a new palace. Moti Bagh gives an outstanding testimony of peaceful co-existence of two different kinds of archaeological school. The long flight of stairs to the durbar hall built by Karam Singh is now a museum. Though the museum is poorly illuminated and not kept in the best of its form, its artifacts are treasure that showcase the regal life of that time. Arms and ammunition along with royal attires of the time with plethora of old photograph throws light on a bygone era. Massive collection of coins, domestic artifacts, oil paintings and old horse carriages are the main attractions of the durbar hall museum. The biggest eye catcher of the museum is a sword of Nadir Shah the Iranian invaders who looted and vandalized India in 1739. A rich collection of Kangra and Rajasthani paintings are also to be checked. Though the museum is not equipped with any physical or audio guide a little attention of self help will benefit the visitor for sure.

The canon park of the fort is another gem. Experience the military supremacy of Patiala by visiting this small yard where huge iron canons from different times are in display.

Moti Bagh Palace built by Narendra Singh in 1847 where royal family later on shifted is

another gem of archeological blending. Its garden was once compared with Shalimar bagh of Kashmir. Counted as one of the finest palaces of Punjab, this palace is now dedicated to nation since 1961 in form of housing Sports Authority of India's head office. Named as Netaji Subhash National Institute of Sports since 1973, it houses an excellent sports museum that preserves Dhyanchand's historical gold medal of Amsterdam Olympics and medal won by PT Usha in 1986 Seoul Asian Games along with many rare articles and photographs. It also has collection of Milkha Singh's Adidas boot used in 1960's Rome Olympics and a bat signed by all members of Indian cricket team that won 1983 cricket world cup. The rich heritage of polo and cricket of Patiala is very nicely displayed. Various sports collection of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh who was the member of Indian cricket team that travelled to England is here on display. This is a unique museum of India.

Seesh Mahal, meaning the glass house, is another feast of eyes as far as its archaeology is concerned. The palace has a heritage hanging bridge inside its ground. The bridge hangs over decorative pillars. The palace houses a museum that has rich collection of miniature kangra paintings. The full series of Radhakrishna leela inspired from Jayadeva's *Geeta Govinda* are a sight to see. Apart from that it has world's largest collection of medals and decoration donated by various kings. 3200 medals are on display covering almost all great honours of the world except a Nobel for example.

We will derive a wrong impression of Patiala if we recognize it only as a seat of regal glamour.

If regality is the first identity of Patiala then its contribution in wisdom and culture can also be counted equally high. The oldest educational institute of Punjab came here in Patiala when Mahindra college was opened in 1870. Later on it expanded when on 17th March 1884 viceroy of India Marquess of Ripon did the honour of opening a new building. Its foundation stone was laid by another viceroy Lord Northbrook in 1875. Founded with full support and funding from royal family and British Government it started functioning under University of Calcutta and first chaired by Bengali educationist Jogindranath Mukherjee. In that era this college had no match from Lahore to Delhi. It was the oldest college, older even than University of Lahore. The college building is a marvellous piece of Indo-European architecture that stands like a royal monument on its 21 acre campus, one of the biggest college campus in India. The central tower and pillars that support library and other buildings are testimony of how special care was taken to make it a real place of sophisticated scholarship.

The story of Patiala will remain incomplete if the music of Patiala is not mentioned. The kingdom took birth as a result of weak Mughal administration and with that a new school of music was also born for the same reason. With its decline many top musicians left Mughal durbar of Delhi and gradually migrated to Patiala. With them came a new wave of culture that created an amazing *gharana* which produced legend of Indian classical music like Ustad Bade Gulam Ali Khan, Akhtar Hussain, Bindu Khan and many more. Patiala *gharana* is now counted one of the elite stream of Indian Hindustani classical music.

It is not only a rich history that makes Patiala special. It is a unique blending of music, education, sports, food and a regal touch that takes the city to the highest herald of Punjabi pride which is almost synonymous with Indian pride to an outsider.