
Sir Ganga Ram —An unsung hero of undivided Punjab

Dr Jaswinder Singh

Sri Guru Gobind Singh College, Sector 26, Chandigarh. 160019

Phone No. 9876066205

Email: jaswinderkk1971@gmail.com

Abstract

Sir Ganga Ram (1851-1927) was a pioneering civil engineer, philanthropist, and entrepreneur from Punjab. He played a crucial role in shaping Lahore's modern architecture during the British colonial era, with notable projects like the General Post Office and Lahore Museum. Beyond engineering, he was an innovative entrepreneur, transforming agriculture in Punjab through projects like the model village of Gangapur and a hydropower project in Renala Khurd. His most enduring legacy lies in philanthropy. Sir Ganga Ram established institutions focused on widows' welfare, education and healthcare, including the Widows' Marriage Association, Hindu Widows' Home, and Sir Ganga Ram Trust. His philanthropic impact continues through the Sir Ganga Ram Hospital in Delhi, India, reflecting his lifelong commitment to societal betterment across India and Pakistan.

Keywords

Sir Ganga Ram, Lahore architecture, Punjab philanthropy, Colonial engineering, Rural entrepreneurship, Social welfare, Agricultural innovation, Sir Ganga Ram Trust.

Introduction:

One of the most iconic short stories about partition, *The Garland*, by Sadat Hasan Manto is set in the frenzied days of Partition in Pakistan. A Muslim mob in Lahore attacks the statue of Sir Ganga Ram, a famous Hindu architect and philanthropist, pelting 'him' with sticks, bricks and stones. One man smears the statue with coal tar and another is shot by police as he places a garland of shoes around the monument's neck. The story closes with the injured man being rushed off, "to be bandaged at Sir Ganga Ram Hospital", founded by the very same Ganga Ram whose image he had been wrecking!. The story sums up how the man and his legacy is intertwined with the city of Lahore¹.

Sir Ganga Ram (1851-1927) was an eminent Indian civil engineer, philanthropist, and entrepreneur, born in Mangtanwala, Punjab (now in Pakistan). He rose to prominence during the British colonial era and played a pivotal role in the development of Lahore and Punjab leaving behind a legacy that continues to shape the region's landscape and social fabric.

Early Life and Education:

Ganga Ram was born in 1851 in Mangtanwala village, presently in Nankana Sahib district, about 40 miles (64km) from Lahore. His father Daulat Ram had left Muzaffarnagar District of United provinces (present Uttar Pradesh), a northern Indian state, seeking refuge from the anarchy around Delhi in the 1840s for the relative safety of the newly conquered British province of Punjab. Daulat Ram's tall physique, felicity in Persian and agrarian background helped him to secure a job and prosper as a junior police sub-inspector there.

Later his father left the police job and his family moved to Amritsar where his father sought refuge in religion and worked as a copyist. Here Ganga Ram studied in a government-run high school. Ganga Ram's early life was marked by the influence of his father. His father's commitment to pluralism, social welfare and education instilled in him a sense of responsibility towards the welfare of society. His modern education broadened his vision and instilled rational, scientific and secular sensibilities in him. His pursuit of higher education led Ganga Ram to travel across northern India and present day Pakistan as he went to Lahore to study at the government college and later secured a scholarship to study engineering at the Thomason Engineering College in Roorkee, now in Uttarakhand state in India. Of the 50 rupees he got as scholarship, he would send half to his parents in Amritsar to supplement their income².

Early Career

After Ganga Ram topped in engineering, he served in Delhi from 1873 and helped build an amphitheatre for the Delhi Durbar of 1877. Later, he was involved in the planning construction of Amritsar-Pathankot railway line before going to Bradford in England to train for waterworks and drainage buildings. He worked in various parts of Punjab before coming to Lahore in 1885 where he became an apprentice in the office of Rai Bahadur Kanhaya Lal, the then chief engineer of Lahore. Here began the "Ganga Ram period" in Lahore's architecture. He went on to become a top civil engineer and shaped the architecture in the city.

Builder of Modern Lahore

Lahore in the 1880s was finally coming out of the shadows of Amritsar which till then was the chief city of Punjab³. Not only the administrative and political centre of Punjab but it was also emerging as the educational and cultural centre of Punjab.

Now it was also acquiring the architectural grandeur being the premier city of Punjab and the man behind the transformation of Lahore was Sir Ganga Ram who served as an executive engineer of Lahore for 12 years.

Sir Ganga Ram's contributions as a builder were unparalleled. He was the mastermind behind various urban development projects in Lahore during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Notable projects included the construction of the General Post Office, Lahore Museum, Mayo College of Arts, Aitchison College and the renovation of the Lahore Fort. His architectural vision blended Indo Saracenic, Classical Gothic and Victorian styles, lending Lahore a unique identity that persists to this day⁴. Ganga Ram used arches and other Indian architectural traditions while employing western construction devices to protect them from the heat and cold of the climate in the Punjab province and ensure efficient and unobtrusive sanitation⁵.

Renowned Pakistani journalist Khaled Ahmed described Ganga Ram as "the father of modern Lahore," for the indelible mark he left on the city

Apart from work done for the British government, he also executed a large number of projects for various princely states. After retirement in 1903 he served as Superintendent Engineer in Patiala for 7 years building the Moti Bagh Palace, Victoria Girls School, State Secretariat, the courts and a police station in Patiala.⁶

For his services in building the Imperial Durbar in Delhi, he received the title of Rai Bahadur and was appointed Companion of the Order of Indian Empire in 1903. He was Subsequently knighted in 1922.

Entrepreneurship:

While Ganga Ram was transforming urban architecture in Lahore as part of his government job, his heart remained in rural Punjab where he had grown up. He returned to his roots in 1903, when he retired from his government post and was allotted land in Chenab Colony (later known as Lyallpur and Faisalabad) as a reward for his past services. Here, he set out to establish Gangapur, a model village with new irrigation and farming systems. He was also one of the earliest pioneers in Punjab to import modern machinery and implements to transform agriculture on modern lines.

Ganga Ram was keen to attempt the irrigation system he had set up in Gangapur on a bigger scale. One of his most ambitious projects was the hydel power project in Renala Khurd in the Montgomery district of Punjab. The project, which was officially opened in 1925, used five turbines to irrigate 360sq.km, comprising 80 thousand acres of wasteland and transform them into fertile fields.

He also built a unique system to transport passengers from the Buchiana railway station, two miles away to Gangapur - laying a narrow track to allow two trolleys hooked to each other to be drawn by a horse.

Ganga Ram's entrepreneurial ventures showcased his innovative spirit. His agricultural innovations led to increased productivity and improved farming techniques in the region. As a successful entrepreneur, he generated significant revenue, which he subsequently reinvested in various industries, including agriculture, textiles, real estate and philanthropic endeavours.

Philanthropy:

While Sir Ganga Ram's building and business achievements were lofty, his vigour and vision in philanthropic entrepreneurship are equally remarkable. He donated a substantial portion of his wealth to charitable causes focusing on widows, education, healthcare and community welfare.

Welfare of widows

Ganga Ram would be up early in the morning to go through his files and prepare for his day. He would sometimes recite verses of Munajat-e-Bewgan (The widow's prayer), a poem by Urdu poet Maulana Altaf Hussain Hali, to himself.

He was often moved to tears when he read the verses. It was the inspiration behind the work he went on to do for widows in conservative Hindu society.

In 1917, Ganga Ram tried to pass a resolution on widow re-marriage at a religious Hindu conference in Ambala city.

When it failed, he founded the Widows' Marriage Association and donated 2,000 rupees (a large sum at the time) from his own money to it.

With the government's approval, Ganga Ram built a Hindu Widows' Home in 1921, costing 250,000 rupees, to train such women with skills to support themselves. The home would go on to have two schools and a hostel. It would help the widows pass examinations and train them to become teachers of handicrafts.

Ganga Ram also funded the establishment of Lady Maynard Industrial School for Hindu and Sikh women who faced financial difficulties⁷.

He also donated liberally for the establishment of Hailey College of Commerce.

Sir Ganga Ram Trust

In 1923, Sir Ganga Ram Trust was registered in the engineer's name. Same year, Sir Ganga Ram Free Hospital and Dispensary was established at Wachhowali in the heart of Lahore. It was later developed as a full-fledged hospital with well-equipped surgical and medical departments. The

hospital was second only to Mayo Hospital, the oldest and biggest hospital in the Punjab province⁸

The trust also established a Hindu Student Careers Society in 1924 (to help Hindu students get employment) and Sir Ganga Ram Business Bureau and Library. The establishment of the Ganga Ram Trust funded schools, hospitals and dispensaries across Punjab. His contributions significantly improved access to education and healthcare for the underprivileged.⁹

Ganga Ram's last charitable project during his lifetime was the establishment of the Hindu Apahaj Ashram over two acres of land. This was a home for the elderly, the disabled and the infirm.

His sons Balak Ram and Sewak Ram carried forward his philanthropic legacy by completing work on the 700-bed hospital and the medical college adjacent to it. After partition Sir Ganga Ram's legacy was taken forward in India with the establishment of Sir Ganga Ram Hospital at Karol Bagh in Delhi which is now a vibrant 675-bed hospital delivering state of the art super speciality medical services in 44 disciplines.

Death

Sir Ganga Ram died at the age of 76 on 10 July 1927 in London.

After his death some of his ashes were brought back to Lahore and buried next to Hindu Apahaj Ashram as per his wishes, where his tomb, the Ganga Ram Samadhi, still stands.

On his death Mahatma Gandhi was moved to write: "I had the privilege of coming into fair contact with him recently and though we could not agree on several matters, I recognised in him a sincere reformer and great worker"¹⁰.

Legacy:

Sir Ganga Ram's enduring legacy encompasses his multifaceted role as a pioneering civil engineer, transformative philanthropist and visionary entrepreneur. As a civil engineer, he played a pivotal role in shaping Lahore's architectural identity, blending diverse styles and constructing iconic landmarks. Ganga Ram's innovation extended to entrepreneurship, where he modernised agriculture and embarked on innovative projects leaving a profound impact on rural Punjab. However, his most remarkable legacy lies in philanthropy, as he established institutions such as hospitals, schools and vocational training centres. Ganga Ram's tireless efforts, driven by his compassion and vision, significantly improved access to education, healthcare and social welfare for the underprivileged. His legacy endures through Sir Ganga Ram Trust, continuing to uplift

and transform lives across India and Pakistan and is a testament to his enduring commitment to the betterment of society.

References:

1. “The Garland” **First published in 1948 and collected in** *Bitter Fruit: The Very Best of Saadat Hasan Manto*, Penguin Global, 2009
2. Harvest from the Desert, BPL Bedi, Sir Ganga Ram Trust, Lahore, 1940, Pages 3-27
3. Gopal Krishan, Demography of Punjab 1849-1947, Journal of Punjab Studies, University of Santa Barbara, Volume 11, Page 82
4. Colonial Lahore, A history of the city and beyond, Ian Talbot and Tahir Kamran, OUP, 2017, Page 15
5. Op.cit, Harvest from the Desert, pages 38-39
6. Punjab’s Eminent Hindus, New Book Society Lahore, 1943, Sir Ganga Ram, pages 26-27
7. Op.cit, Harvest from the Desert, pages 201-14
8. Ibid, Harvest from the Desert, page 230
9. Op.cit, Punjab’s Eminent Hindus, Sir Ganga Ram, page 24-33
10. Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume 39, 4 June 1927-1 September 1927, Page 266-67