

Sikhs and Afghans: From Guru Nanak to Maharaja Ranjit Singh

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Part III@

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Seventh Invasion Martyrdom of Baba Gurbakhsh Singh

Qazi Nur Mohammad who accompanied Ahmed Shah Abdali during his seventh invasion and called the Sikhs “dogs” has given a vivid account of Baba Gurbakhsh Singh whose revered memorial (*Shahid Ganj*) is just behind Akal Takht, Amritsar. These thirty Singhs who challenged an army of thirty thousand Afghans belonged to the Jatha of Bhai Gurbakhsh Singh of village Lehl near Khemkaran, district Amritsar. The names of three of them have survived, Man Singh, Basant Singh and Nihal Singh. The author of Jang Namah writes the account of seventh invasion of Ahmed Shah Abdali:

“When the Shah arrived at the Chak there was not a single Kafir to be seen. But a few of them had remained in an enclosure so that they might spill their own blood. And they sacrificed their lives for the sake of Guru. When they saw the renowned King and the army of Islam, they came out of the enclosure. They were only thirty in number. But they had not a grain of fear about them. They had no fear of death. Thus they grappled with the Ghazis and in this grappling they spilt their own blood. All the accused Sikhs were killed and went to hell. The Islamis ran to right and the left in search of them but they did not find even one of the impertinent dogs. The Shah had, therefore, to return to Lahore helplessly.”³¹

Ahmed Shah Abdali mounted several invasions to occupy and annex Punjab to Kabul kingdom. On every occasion, he was harassed by the Sikh bands. The Sikh warriors bands, called *Missal*, began to occupy territory at various places. They conquered Lahore in 1765 and struck coin in the name of Gurus. The Inscription of the coin was the same as that issued by Banda Singh Bahadur, viz Dego Tego Nusrat bedrang - Yaft as Nanak Guru Gobind Singh. The kettle and the sword (symbols of charity and power) victory and ready patronage have been obtained from Guru Nanak - Gobind Singh. The same inscription continued until 1849 when the Punjab was annexed. Most of the Punjab was occupied by the Sikh Misaldars. Ahmad Shah Abdali, the best horseman of his times in Asia, conqueror of Delhi, the age old capital of the Mughals, the victor of the Battle of Panipat where he gave crushing defeat to Marathas felt exhausted before the valiant Khalsa. He left Punjab and died in 1772.

A Tribute by Qazui Nur Mohammed

Qazi Nur Mohammad, son of Qazi Abdullah belonged to village Gunzaba in Baluchistan). He was with Nasir Khan of Kalat when the latter joined Ahmed Shah Abdali in his jihad against the Sikhs. Qazi Nur Mohammad has written the account of seventh invasion of Ahmad Shah Abdali. Out of contempt for the Sikhs he calls them *sagg* which, in Persian, means dog, dog of hell, pig eaters, accursed infidels, etc. But he has paid the highest tribute to the character of Sikhs of eighteenth century. A bigoted writer who has got

strong prejudices against Sikhs paying such glowing tribute to their character, is a matter of pride for the Sikhs. He writes:

Leaving aside their mode of fighting, hear you another point in which they excel other fighting people.

In no case they would slay a coward or put any obstacle in way of a fugitive

They do not plunder the wealth and ornament of women be she a well-to-do lady or maid servant.

There is no adultery among the 'dogs' nor are these 'mischievous people' given to thieving

Whether a woman young or old they call her 'budhya', an old lady, and ask her to get out of the way.

There is no thief at all among these 'dogs' nor is there any house breaker born amongst these 'miscreants.'

Because they do not make friend with adulterers and house breakers.³²

Subjugation of Afghan Turbulent Tribes of North Western Frontier

The rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1839) will ever remain watershed in the annals of the trans-Indus regions especially Peshawar, Bannu as well as Hazara. All these areas alongwith Kashmir were a part of the Afghanistan. Olaf Caroe writes, "Ranjit Singh had wrested from Afghan their fairest provinces not only those east of Indus where Kabul rulers could claim no racial affinity, but Peshawar itself and Bannu, fertile gardens inhabited by proud people of Afghan and Pathan stock."³³ Maharaja Ranjit Singh undertook strong measures to subdue and control the ferocious tribes of north western frontier. These tribes had not ever been subjugated and brought under control of Attock District gazetteer, writes, "The Mughal sway was more nominal than real. They appear to have been content to levy revenue and there is nothing to show that any serious government was attempted. The whole district paid only half of a lakh of rupees and heads of each tribe were practically independent."³⁴ After the conquest of Afghan principalities Kasur, Kashmir and Multan he led his legions across the Indus. This was big challenge to the valiant Afghans who raised a cry of Jihad under Azim Khan ruler of Kabul. A big army was collected on the bank of river at Naushera. (Distt. Peshawar). Ranjit Singh won the decisive victory and surging crowds of Ghazis was dispersed in 1823 AD. Azim Khan died of the shock.³⁵ After this decisive battle army of Ranjit Singh conquered Peshawar and its surrounding areas. Peshawar was annexed to Sikh kingdom in 1834 and Hari Singh Nalwa who has been described as ideal Sikh soldier" by Olaf Caroe³⁶ was appointed as its Governor. All these trans-Indus areas were never under any regular administration as it had been rightly stated by Olaf Caroe territorial link of administration has to be traced to its beginnings in the Sikh occupation of Peshawar."³⁷ Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his general Hari Singh Nalwa dealt with the north western frontier tribes in two phases dividing it into two sectors viz (i) Hazara sector and (ii) Peshawar sector.

Hazara Sector

Hazara, the country west of Kashmir, east of Peshawar and north west of Attock, was conquered and annexed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1820. Its first Nizam under Ranjit Singh was Amar Singh Majithia who ruled over the territory for two years. He was successful in suppressing the rebellion of Muhammed Khan Train and was able to defeat Dhund, Tarin, Tanol and Kharal tribes who were fighting against him. The battle was over, the enemy had taken to flight and the Sikh forces had retired from the field. When Amar Singh, thirsty and fatigued, went down to the little stream 'Samandar' to bathe, he had only few horsemen with him, and number of the enemy, returning and seeing the weakness of

the little party, came down and killed Amar Singh and his followers after a desperate defence.³⁸ After the death Amar Singh Majithia, Hari Singh Nalwa was appointed the Nazim of Hazara. He was not unknown to the Hazara tribes. When Maharaja Ranjit Singh led the army to conquer Mansera in 1821 he ordered Hari Singh Nalwa who was in Kashmir to join him there. At that time Hari Singh Nalwa had only seven thousand army. On the way, he was opposed by twenty thousand wild mountaineers living in the Pakhly hills. Pakhly or Hazara was the spot dreaded by merchants for these tribes demanded toll on the merchandise. Hari Singh after his vain efforts to induce the enemy to yield him a passage attacked them with vigour and storming their stockade defeated them with great slaughter.³⁹ This was no mean achievement to defeat about the twenty thousand Hazara tribes with seven thousand men. Maharaja was much pleased over this exploit of Hari Singh Nalwa. This incident indicates how precarious were the conditions. N K Sinha has rightly stated 'in Pakhli Damataur, Torbela and Darband region Sikh sway was still precarious. Hari Singh Nalwa was about this time sent there to create a tradition of vigorous and efficient administration'.⁴⁰ According to Griffin, "Hazara was the most turbulent province under the Sikh rule."⁴¹

In order to understand the measures of Hari Singh Nalwa, it is essential to understand the geographical condition of this region as well as tribal distribution. Hasham Khan belonged to the northern area and was the leader of the Kral tribe (of Karlani tribe which is branch of Khattak tribe). In order to have full control over the area Hari Singh Nalwa built fort at Nara, a modern Tehsil Abbotabad.⁴² Army was stationed there to keep in check the Pathans on this side.

On the western side of Hazara territory the river Indus forms the natural defence but on the north and eastern side was bounded by partly river Jhelum and partly by the mountainous range known as Pakli range. In the Ain-i-Akbari, the entire territory is known as Pakhli.⁴³ Pakhli appears to have derived from Pactyam nation mentioned by Herodotus.⁴⁴

According to Ibbetson, the following tribes chiefly occupied the Hazara territory - Dilzak, Swati, Jadun, Tanaoli and Shilamani.⁴⁵ In the lower range according to Prem Singh the main Pathan tribes were Tarin, Utmanzai, Tarkholi.⁴⁶ In order to check these ferocious tribes Hari Singh Nalwa adopted suitable measure to control them. He built a very strong fort in the valley surrounded by mountains and named it after the eighth Guru of the Sikhs as Harkrishangarh and also founded a town named Haripure. The town was surrounded by a wall which was four yards thick and sixteen yards high and had four gates. Drinking water was provided to the town by digging a tank. Many small drains were dug to carry water into the streets of the town. Baron Hugal visited the town on December 23, 1835 and he found the town humming with activity.⁴⁷

In the upper ranges of Pakhli there lived mainly Jadun, Tanawali and Swatis.⁴⁸ Hari Singh built forts at strategic places and garrisoned them with army. The roads were built to link them so that reinforcement should be sent from one fort to another fort at the time of crisis. The forts built in the upper ranges of

Pakhli were: Fort Nowan Shehar, Fort Dhamtaur, Fort Darband and Fort Shinkiari.⁴⁹ Old fort at Tarbela was repaired.

Subjugation of Tribes in Peshawar Sector

When Peshawar was conquered and annexed Hari Singh Nalwa was appointed its Governor in 1834 A.D.⁵⁰

It was very important to understand the tribal distribution in the Peshawar region. Khattaks predominantly settled in Khattak, country from the south of Kabul river on the low lands from Indus to Noushehra. They were fanatical people and never liked the Sikhs.

Ysafzais were the largest of the Peshawar tribes. They were extremely warlike. Muhammadzai inhabited the area north east of Peshawar. The Girgianis had their settlements south of Muhammadzai areas and they were in open rebellion as their lands had been given to Barakzai chiefs under the Sikh Government. Afridis ruled supreme in the the Kalibar area. Besides these, there were other tribes like Khalis Mohammad, etc. The tribesman in each Khel looked to his Malik or Khan or council of elders viz *jirga* for guidance in matters of common interest and not to the ruling authority at Peshawar. As such he was ever ready to take up arms when called upon by chief against the infidel Sikhs.

Hari Singh Nalwa knew how to match his hatred to Afghans against their hatred of Sikhs. He set up a very strong administration in the Peshawar valley. He levied a cess of Rupee four per house on the Yusafzais. This cess was to be collected in cash or in kind. For its realization personal household property could be appointed. There was scarcely a village which was not burnt. In such awe were his visitations held at his name was used by mothers as a term of a fright to hush their unruly children.

It was prudently realized that although the spell of Afghan supremacy was broken, the region predominantly populated by turbulent and warlike Muhammadan tribes could not be securely held unless a large army was permanently stationed there. A force of twelve thousand was with Hari Singh Nalwa to quell any sign of turbulence and to realize the revenue. The terror of the name of Khalsa resounded in the valley. Part of the city of Peshawar was burnt and the residence of the Barkzai governors at Bala Hissar was raised to the ground. Hari Singh Nalwa strengthened the Sikh position by garrisoning the frontier forts.

Administrative Measures

In order to subjugate north western frontier tribes Hari Singh Nalwa examined the topography of the Peshawar region. There were three rivers flowing from Afghanistan to Peshawar forming three water routes as well as land routes as has always been the case in the hilly area. The highest tributary of the river Indus on the western side was the river Kabul. Kabul the capital of Afghanistan and Jalalabad a very important town between Kabul and Peshawar have been situated on the banks of this river. Noushehra where a decisive battle had been fought in 1823 AD between the Afghans and the Sikhs was also situated on the bank of this river. The second important was Barha river. It was a tributary of river Kabul and joined it from the southern side. Peshawar which was capital of the region was situated on it. The Swat river which was a tributary of river Kabul joined it from the north. Hari Singh Nalwa decided to built forts in order to check infiltration of and the invasion of the Afghans on all these routes. The nearest mountainous pass to Pashawar was Khaibar pass which was only nine miles from Peshawar. On the previous occasion all important invaders had made invasions on India through it. Hari Singh Nalwa had decided to construct forts on all these strategic points. On the bank of river Kabul Michni fort was constructed and it was put under the command of Nichhatar Singh son of a well known general Dhanna Singh Malwai. In this fort were stationed 300 infantry men, 100 horsemen, 10 artillery men, 2 big and 2 small cannons. On the bank of river Barha, a strong fort was built. It was named Barha fort. 300 infantry, 100 cavalry 3 cannon pieces were placed there and suitable provisions were supplied. It was placed under Jhanda Singh Butalia. On the Swat river side there was a strategic place where three routes met. These three routes were one from Kabul, another from Hashantnagar which was an Afghan settlement on the extreme north and the third was Gandhav Pass which was a minor pass. Hari Singh constructed a fort here. It was named as Shankargarh. There were stationed 500 infantry, 300 cavalry, 35 artillery, men, 2 big and 10 small cannons. It was placed under Lehna Singh Sindhanwalia who was very well known

warrior. But the most important route was the Khaibar Pass which had been traditional route for the invaders since times immemorial.

After surveying the entire area Hari Singh found a small mound on the eastern end of Khaibar Pass. It was in the nearby village named Jamrud. It had a very small mud fort. Hari Singh decided to built a fort there. Necessary material was collected and a foundation of a very strong fort was laid there on Oc. 17, 1836. According to Prem Singh, Hari Singh Nalwa himself laid the foundation of that fort after prayers. The masons and the labourers were working there continuously and they were also able to finish this historic fort after a month and twenty-five days. Its walls were 4 yards wide, 12 yards high. It was named as Fatehgarh Sahib. There were stationed 800 infantry, 200 cavalry, 80 artillery men, 10 big cannons and 12 small cannons. Maha Singh, a very tried general was appointed the commander of the fort. In the fort of Jamrud there was scarcity of water. There was a little stream which flowed in the Khaibar Pass itself and it was under the control of the Afridis. In order to have constant flow of water in the fort the Afridis were given a jagir worth Rs. 1,200/-. An alternate arrangement of water was also made in the fort in case this flow of water was stopped. A very big well was dug in fort to supply water if Afridis stopped the water.

Another important fort was built on the road leading to this fort linking Peshawar. It was just in the middle of way between Jamrud and Peshawar. It was named Burj Hari Singh and 100 men were stationed. It was comparatively small fort.

Besides this Hari Singh got repaired the old forts like Attock, Khairabad, Shubkadar and Jehangira. The line of forts on the north western side were linked by roads so that reinforcement could reach there in the time of crisis. Peshawar was strongly fortified and it was linked with Attock by a line of towers erected at the interval of two kos.

All these measures alarmed the Afghans especially Dost Mohammad, the Burkzal Chief of Kabul. The Afghans apprehended that their dangerous neighbours would make an inroad beyond the 'formidable defile'. They, therefore, resolved to put a stop to any further advance of Sikhs into the tribal areas. A force of 8,000 strong, with 50 cannons, under Akbar Khan and Abdul Samad Khan proceeded towards the Khaibar to dislodge Sikhs from Jamrud. The cry of Jihad swelled their ranks to 20,000 horse and foot. Hari Singh Nalwa was killed in the battle of Jamrud most valiantly in 1837.⁶⁰ Thus ended the life of a great general who had become a terror for Afghans and subdued the turbulent tribes of North Western Frontier.

The Afghans had been invading India for a number of centuries (1001-1798 AD). They had never seen a defeat at the hands of Indians whom they considered 'Kafirs' and whom they contemptuously called "*Hindku*". **For the first time of their history they were decisively defeated at the battle of Naushehra, 1823 Battle of Saido (1827) and battle of Balakot (1831) by Sikhs whom they considered "Kafir"**. Now they were bewildered and confused and began to say "*Khalsa ham-Khuda Shud*" Khalsa too has become believer in God."

End of Part III
(Concluded)

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