

# Decline & Fall of the Sikh Kingdom: The Lesser-known Facts

Col. (Retd.) Harsharan Singh Sandhu\*

Part I

---

\* # 149, Sector 27-A, Chandigarh. 160019.

---

Several eminent historians have written on this subject, unmasking the treachery of Dogra brothers, Misar Tej Singh, Misar Lal Singh, the conspiracies by Sandhanwalia Sirdars, Rani Jindan, Jawahar Singh, Pandit Jallah, and the intrigues of other nobility of the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The most notorious deception in the annals of the military history by Misar Tej Singh - the Commander in Chief of the Khalsa Army who, during the Anglo Sikh War, deployed his forces and conducted the battle with a view to getting his own army destroyed by the enemy, is well documented. Historians have laid stress on the 'self destructive' role of the Sikhs in general and on the nobles in particular.<sup>2</sup>

During 1845-48, there were revolutions in European countries - except Russia and England. Monarchies were overthrown and governments were changed. If the Sikh kingdom, with the best trained standing army and gunners in Asia, would have either been overthrown and the Monarchy replaced with the democratic "Panchait System" as it had come into being in the Army, or any usurper would have occupied the Lahore Durbar, it could all have been attributed to its internal weakness, and in tune with what was happening elsewhere in the world. **But how the Kingdom collapsed totally and it's people enslaved by a foreign power has not been explained by the historians truthfully.** Sir Winston Churchill, the 20th century statesman, writing about the Anglo Sikh wars, states: "encouraged by the news (adverse for the English) from Afghanistan, **and restless after the death of their great leader Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who had hitherto held them in check,** the Sikhs resolved to try their hand at invading the company's territory. In 1845 they crossed the boundary of river Sutlej, and were met and repulsed two hundred miles North of Delhi. The British installed regency, three years later the Sikhs tried to overthrow it. There was a desperate battle, deep within the province at Chillianwala, in which three British regiments lost their colours. Shortly afterwards, the British redeemed their name and the Sikh army was destroyed."<sup>1</sup> This statement glosses over the historical truth. In the same manner other historians have either ignored the issue or twisted the facts to please the English.

## Treachery:

What was the role of the "English" in planning and destroying the Sikh Kingdom? Did they play a treacherous role? How far did the English honour the treaty of "Perpetual Friendship" signed with Maharaja Ranjit Singh? These questions have been amply researched and answered by the greatest Sikh Historian "Punjab Rattan" Sirdar Khushwant Singh in the book "Fall of Kingdom of the Punjab". The role of Cis-Sutlej states, whose rulers bowed down in awe and submission to a mere servant of the East India Company (a 'joint-stock firm' floated by a nation of traders), - has not been touched upon even by Sirdar Khushwant Singh.<sup>2</sup>

Capt. J D Cunningham, another eminent historian and a great authority on the Sikhs was political agent of the English on the Sutlej frontier and assistant to Col. Wade, in charge of English relations with Punjab. He had lived with the Sikhs for eight years during which he

wrote "History of Sikhs", the most authoritative book on the Sikhs till date. While touching about the war between the Sikhs and the English, on page 270, he writes no more than this : "The Cis-Sutlej feudatories kept aloof from their new masters or excited disturbances". He has also given some details of the Raja of Ladwa describing him as a "traitor", as the Raja had joined a division of the Sikh Army.

### **Chaos in 18th Century:**

The invasions of Nadir Shah, beginning from the year 1739 AD onwards, resulted in weakening the Mughal Kingdom, even as they plunged Punjab into chaos. Under these tumultuous conditions, the Sikhs occupied Lahore in February, 1764 AD. After the final retreat of Ahmad Shah Abdali from India, in the year 1767, the Sikhs occupied most of his Indian Territories. The Sikh sway extended from Saharanpur, in the East, to Attock in the West, from Multan in the South to Kangra and Jammu in the North. The whole country, from Jhelum to Jamuna, was partitioned amongst Sikh Chiefs. Sarkar-e-Khalsa, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Kingdom extended North of river Sutlej. South of it the area was partitioned among the Phoolkian states and other Sikh chiefs. This area came to be commonly known as the Cis-Sutlej states. **Maharaja Ranjit Singh aimed at supremacy all over the Sikh territory to give unity and coherence to diverse and scattered elements, to mould an increasing Sikh Nation, into a well ordered state, or The Commonwealth of The Khalsa, as had been envisaged by Guru Gobind Singh Ji.** The realization of this aim required establishment of Ranjit Singh's control over the Cis-Sutlej area, but this was not acceptable to the Sikh Chiefs. Their representatives waited upon Mr. Seton the British Resident at Delhi, during 1805 soliciting English protection, but for the time being their appeal passed unheeded.

During the 1st half of the 19th century the British government was brought into line with the policies of the East Indian company. English armies were at war with the Marhattas with a view to destroying their power in the Maharashtra area. **Jaswant Rao Holkar after his defeat at the hands of General Lake, had crossed the Sutlej in the autumn of 1805 to seek assistance from Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He received Holkar at Amritsar but did not oblige him, as he did not want to embroil his "young nation" with the English.** General Lake, had followed Holkar upto River Beas, through Cis-Sutlej states territory. Lake had been joined by the Sikh chiefs, namely Sardar Lal Singh of Kaithal, and Sardar Bhag Singh of Jind, who had 'rendered good service' to the English. On his passage through Patiala, Lake had received promises of devotion from its ruler Raja Shahib Singh. During March 1808 Sikh chiefs of Patiala, Jind and Kaithal, citing their friendly intercourse with General Lake, once again sent their agents to the English resident Mr. Seton in Delhi, praying for protection against Maharaja Ranjit Singh their coreligionist and compatriot.

The "English", having been assured the support of Cis-Sutlej states, started planning to expand their area of influence upto Afghanistan. In view of the possibility of a French invasion of the country in alliance with Turks or even an invasion by Russians, whose small Army manned by German Generals, had penetrated into the fringes of Afghanistan, it was feared by the English that French/Russians may expand their kingdom to Afghanistan to seek access to warm water ports. In view of this appreciation, the English now led by Lord Minto sent their ambassadors to Kabul and Lahore. Mr. Metcalf, the English ambassador reached Lahore to negotiate an offensive - defensive alliance with a view to protect India against any such invasion.

While Metcalf was in Lahore, Maharaja Ranjit Singh learnt about the protection demanded and given to the Cis-Sutlet states by the English. Maharaja Ranjit Singh therefore as a price for such an offensive/defensive alliance demanded from the English

acknowledgment of his suzerainty over Cis-Sutlej states. But the English did not agree and instead opposed his extension beyond Sutlej. During 1808 a body of troops was dispatched by the English towards Punjab under the command of Lt. Col. Ochterlony to enforce the demands and support the negotiations of Mr Metcalf. Raja Jaswant Singh of Nabha received Col. Ochterlony with cordiality. Raja Sahib Singh of Patiala received the force with much fanfare and firing of guns in salute. This led Maharaja Ranjit Singh to sign with the English a treaty of **“Perpetual Friendship” at Amritsar on 25th April, 1809**. The English frontier was extended to Ludhiana without a single shot being fired by the English - courtesy Cis-Sutlej states.<sup>56</sup> **It marked the beginning of the disruption of the great creation of Guru Gobind Singh - the Khalsa Panth.**

#### **Breach of Faith:**

The English notwithstanding the treaty of “Perpetual Friendship”, began giving shape to their plans for extending their influence up to Afghanistan. Shah Shuja, the deposed ruler of Afghanistan, was given shelter during 1813-14 at Lahore. In April 1815 the English succeeded in clandestinely shifting Shah Shuja to Ludhiana - the area under their control - for installing him, as the ‘puppet ruler’ of Afghanistan on a future date.

In May 1838 a complementary deputation was sent by Maharaja Ranjit Singh to Lord Auckland, Governor General at Shimla. To reciprocate, Lord Auckland sent a mission to the Court at Lahore. Mr W H Macnaughten was deputed on the mission. He was accompanied amongst other members by Mr W Osborne, Military Secretary to the Governor General. Mr Osborne started writing a journal, immediately on arrival at Ropar. The following thoughts are recorded by him in the journal dtd. 22nd, 23rd, 24th 25th May 1838.

**“On the death of Ranjit Singh, which in the common cause of nature must take place in a very few years, his throne will become an object of contention between two rival candidates - Sher Singh, his natural son, and Kharak Singh his rightful son and heir. The whole country between Sutlej and Indus must become the scene of protected and bloody war, only to be terminated by the interference of a third and stronger power, and that army must be the British army and that power the British government. There can be little doubt that self preservation required that the government of Punjab should either be our own or friendly to us. We have, therefore, but one course to pursue on Ranjit Singh’s death - the instant occupation of the Punjab by an overwhelming force and the extension of our North-Western frontier.”**

English plans for occupation of the Punjab were being given shape, as is recorded by Capt. J D Cunningham who held several political appointments from 1838 to 1846. He had to pay the price for writing “

**History of Sikhs”**. When the work appeared in 1849, the Governor General the Earl of Dalhousie rendered **the publication of it a crime!** He removed Cunningham from the service of the English. Cunningham writes that when English General Sir Henry Frence came to Lahore in March 1837 to attend the marriage of Prince Nau Nihal Singh, he formed an estimate of the force which would be required for the complete subjugation of the Punjab. He further writes that **Lt. Col. Garden who accompanied Henry completed a detailed map of that part of the country, which formed the ground work of all maps used by the English when hostilities broke out with Sikhs. Cunningham died of a broken heart of young age of 39 - paying for his honest writing about the Sikhs.**

#### **Artful Statecraft:**

The Anglo Sikh wars were fought during the year 1845. But as early as on 26.05.1841 Mrs. Henry Lawrence wrote to Mrs. Cameron from Subathoo: “Wars and rumours of wars are on every side, and there seems no doubt that next cold weather **will decide the long**

**suspended question of occupying the Punjab**". She again wrote on 5th June "Nothing is yet promulgated" but Henry supposes the Army of Punjab will be divided into three columns - the main body accompanied by Mr Clerk - our Chief, and the others by Henry and Mr Cunningham, an officer of Engineers now acting at Ferozepur, (Henry Lawrence by Edwards and Marrivale). **The Calcutta papers carried the plans for conquering Punjab - surely Chiefs of Cis-Sutlej states were not so naive that they were not aware of this.**

Lord Ellenborough, after he had taken over as Governor General was in frequent touch with the Duke of Wellington. He wrote to the Duke on 7.6.1842 "I have, after communicating with the Commander-in-Chief, issued an order for the assembling of an army of reserve in the Division of Sirhind (that is, either at Karnal or Ferozepur) in November. It will consist of twelve Regiments of Infantry, of which four will be European or five regiments of the regular Cavalry (including 16th lancers) and 2 regiments of irregular Cavalry. There will be four troops of horse artillery and three batteries of foot artillery. The total force will be 15,000 men". In the book (**Life of Sir Henry Lawrence** by Major General Sir Herbert Edwards) the author states that Henry Lawrence wrote in his letter 11.05.1843 as follows, "the break up of the Punjab will probably begin with murder".

#### **Mayhem:**

Lawrence again wrote on 12.08.1843 "The affairs of the Punjab will probably receive their *dénouement* from the death of Sher Singh". Now the English stepped in with their grand designs. At the instance of Mr Clark - their political agent in Ludhiana, Attar Singh and Ajit Singh Sandhawalia were permitted to return to the kingdom of Lahore from exile. **Shortly thereafter Sandhawalia Sardar Ajit Singh, murdered Maharaja Sher Singh, his son prince Partap Singh and Dhian Singh Dogra on 15.09.1843 with a 12 Bore DB gun of English make.**

After the assassination of Maharaja Sher Singh, chaotic conditions prevailed in Punjab, the army became all powerful and started interfering in the administration of the state. Dogra brothers - an ambitious family, started dreaming of independent rule in Jammu Hills. Sardar Tej Singh, Lal Singh and others of their like, became preoccupied in intrigues for power and self-aggrandizement. British agents were active and had subverted the loyalties of the European officers and many of the Sirdars.

All these elements, in order to ensure their self interest, and the security of their high positions, desired the destruction of the Sikh army but not the subjugation of the state of Punjab. Thus the Sikh soldiers were wrought upon to wage war with the English. The English were too willing to oblige, since they had been preparing for such an event for several years. The hostile actions from both sides led to the declaration of war through proclamation by the Governor-General of India from "camp Lakh Khan ki Sarai, on **13 December 1845, against the state of Punjab, ruled by the infant Maharaja Daleep Singh, for whose protection the English were bound by the "Treaty of Perpetual Friendship"**. Commander-in-Chief of the Sikh army Sardar Lal Singh was in communication with Capt. Nicolson, the English agent at Ferozepur assuring him of his loyalty and friendship towards the English.

The war that followed, which had all but been won at Feroze Shah, was neutralized by the treachery of Sikh leaders and chief of the Cis-Sutlej state, and it decided the campaign for SOBRAON against the Sikh army. **Capt. Cunningham and Colonel GB Malleson have written in minutest detail about this war, but not a single word has been written about the part played by Chiefs of Cis-Sutlej states, who had betrayed their Sikh brothers.**

#### **Grand Design:**

The English desire for the annexation of Punjab had not been highlighted by the historians, while stress has been laid on the “self destructive” role of the court at Lahore. The people of Cis-Sutlej area and rank and file of the armies were hostile to the English, but were helpless against the decisions of their own rulers.

The English experienced difficulties in obtaining their daily required supplies of rations, fuel and transport, from Cis-Sutlej area which they had annexed - by pen and NOT by sword. The fort of Muktasar was defended against Bikaner state troops. Fort at Dharamkot was held against the English. The Lahore feudatory of MANDI and some Sikhs did threaten the hill stations of Shimla, Kasauli and Sabathu, where English families and rear parties were residing, but did not destroy them. Raja Ajit Singh of Ladwa, joined the division of the Sikh army and, under Ranjodh Singh, crossed Jullunder Doab and burnt a portion of the cantonment at Ludhiana.

**End of Part I**

(To be concluded)

