

# The Sikh Conquest of Ladakh and Tibet: 1834-40 A.D.

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IN A PRAGMATIC FOREIGN POLICY, no country is a permanent friend or foe; only self-interest is the key. That Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a past-master in diplomacy is amply proved by his policy towards Nepal after defeating them in the Sikh-Gorkha battle at Kangra in 1809, after they approached him to have a common alliance against the British after the outbreak of Anglo-Nepalese war of 1814-16.

Ranjit Singh is reported to have told Bhai Gurbaksh Singh, Dhanna Singh and others, in a private conversation in 1814: "though apparently sincere friendship is supposed to exist between myself and the English people, yet in reality, our relations are merely formal and conventional. Therefore, I had thought out to myself that in case the English should act differently in their dealings with me, I would call upon the Gurkhas and make friends with them and, in case they showed any hesitation, I intended to make over the fort of Kangra to them to win their comradeship. Now they have been expelled from the mountains and it cannot be said when they would cherish a desire for the above-mentioned region. I never expected such a thing to happen that the mountainous region would be evacuated by them so suddenly."

It appears that, on hindsight, the Maharaja felt repentant for defeating his true ally - Nepal, and never wanted them to evacuate the mountainous region, because he realised the strategic importance of such a region. He knew that the Sikh nation would be invincible only if it had inaccessible and unsurpassable Himalayan ranges under its control. So, having lost territorial contact with Nepal (due to British victory over Nepal in Anglo-Nepalese War 1814-16), the Maharaja was looking forward to winning Ladakh and Tibet, to restore the territorial contact with Nepal. In this connection, we should note Wade's despatch to the British secretary, which reads: "The information gained by me in my late visit to Lahore was that, among other objects of ambition, Raja Gulab Singh had in taking Ladakh, one was to extend the conquest down the course of the Spitis until they approached the north-eastern confines of the Nepalese possessions in order that he might connect himself with that Government ostensibly with the view to promote the trade between Lhasa and Ladakh, which the late commotions in Tibet have tended to interrupt, but in reality to establish a direct intercourse with a power which he thinks will not only tend greatly to augment his present influence but lead to an alliance which may at some future period be of reciprocal importance."

So, for a long time Ranjit Singh's intention of invading Ladakh was an open secret. We learn from Cunningham "The History of Sikhs" when Mr. Moorcraft was in Ladakh (in 1821) the fear of Ranjit Singh was general in that country and the Sikh Governor of Kashmir had already demanded the payment of tribute." But the opportunity came in 1834, when Britishers were trying to check his advance towards East beyond Suttlej and towards West, Ranjit Singh burst forth towards North beyond Himalayas.

The plateau of Ladakh is in the upper Indus valley, and two-thirds of the people were Bhutias, and the Rajas's title was known as Geeape. Rajas were frequently changed who used to turn Lamas (priests) afterwards. The troops of the Raja used Match-locks, bows,

arrows and swords. They were mostly horsemen and numbered about 8000. The infantry was around 1200 in number and used the same arms. Revenue of Ladakh Raja was approximately Rs. 5 lakhs p.a. which used to be paid in kind. The only stook-in-trade was shawl-wool but the trade was not inconsiderable. Ladakh has no relation with China, of a political nature, had no connection with Lhasa save that which arose from community of religion, manners, and close proximity.

In 1820 and 1821, when Moorcraft came to Ladakh with a view to opening up British trade relation, and buying horses and wool, the Ladakh Government tendered its allegiance to the British rulers through him, but as the British authorities had not yet become apprehensive of accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of Ranjit Singh, Moorcraft was disowned by them and they tried their best to quiet the alarms of Ranjit Singh.

Taking advantage of the rift in the ruling family of Ladakh Maharaja Ranjit Singh despatched his General Zorawar Singh who was posted at Kishtwar, at the head of a 8000 strong force of cavalry and infantry towards Ladakh in July 1834 (may be May 1834) and declared that an estate, anciently held by the Kishtwar Chief must be restored. At that time, Dr. Henderson happened to be present there. The Raja of Ladakh gave out that he was a British ambassador and had been sent to ratify the treaty that Moorcraft had entered into with him. But he knew that Dr. Henderson was only an explorer. For three months the operation of Zorawar Singh was suspended. The matter was referred through Raja Golab Singh to Maharaja, who in turn referred it to British Resident at Ludhiana. The Resident assured the Maharaja that Dr. Henderson was not their representative.

On 16 Aug. 1834 General Zorawar Singh defeated a 5000-strong Ladakhi forces and advanced towards its capital, Leh leaving small detachments at the imperial places en route to secure his rear. At Leh he deposed the reigning king and set up the latter's rebellious minister in stead. He placed a garrison at Leh and fixed a yearly tribute of Rs. 30,000 as levy. He retained some districts along the northern slopes of the Himalayas. According to Cunningham, he did not reach the capital until early 1835. As the winter approached, the General left for Jammu, and thence for Lahore, with a clutch of presents for the Maharaja. He presented Nazrana before Maharaj Ranjit in the winter of 1835 [1836, according to Khushwant Singh: *The History of the Sikhs*, Vol. I]. The General requested Maharaja to allow him to carry Maharaja's arms to the borders of China. But the astute Maharaja, knowing fully well that 'Padishah' of China had 1,20,000 soliders ready to fight, advised him not to venture into little Tibet.

According to Cunningham, "The dispossessed Raja complained to the Chinese authorities in Lhasa, but the tribute continued to be regularly paid by his successor, no notice was taken of the usurpation." [*The History of the Sikhs*, p. 272.]

Taking advantage of General Zorawar Singh's absence and cold weather, the Ladakhis wiped out many of the small garrisons at Suru to sword. Zorawar Singh had to repeat his previous performance. Though death overtook Maharaja Ranjit Singh on 27 June 1839, Zorawar went ahead with his conquering spree during the Regency of Nau Nihal Singh. First he turned his attention to Baltistan - Skardu, Gilgit and Humza, [from Leh this area is down the Indus]. As Balties were better fighters than Ladakhis, the General decided to take them one by one. He dealt with Skardu forces first and defeated them in July 1840. The rulers of Gilgit and Humza submitted without giving a fight. Gilgit and Humza fall on the National Highway built by Chinese across India and Nepal border, linking Rudok, Tashigong and Gartok - the places invaded later by General Zorawar Singh.

Zorawar Singh belonged to a Rajput family from Kahlur near Pathankot. He was first employed as a Sepoy in the forces of Raja Gulab Singh of Jammu - a tributary of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. His energy and military latent was recognised and he was promoted as a petty official to Gulab Singh. At this time Zorawar Singh was brought to the notice of Maharaja. From then on his rise was meteoric and he became a General.

Having subdued Baltistan, Zorawar Singh turned his attention towards Tibet. For this expedition he recruited Ladakhis and Balties with little bit of Dogras. This force had very little of Sikh soldiers and this factor ultimately led to his debacle. He collected a 5000 strong force at Leh from where he commenced his advance (May 1841) towards western Tibet and entered Tibet near Tashigong [From Leh up the Indus river] and captured Rudok towards middle of 1841 and then Gartok and Garo - 1841. Rudok is towards north of Tashigong and Gartok and Gar (Gare) are towards East. Gartok is situated at approximately the same longitude and latitude. May be these two places are very close or the same place having two names. Gartok and Gar are jut on the top of Khojarnath pass in the North - West corner of Nepal, from where people enter into Nepal from Tibet. So Maharaja Ranjit Singh's dream of establishing land route with Nepal, by-passing occupied India, was realised.

But General Zorawar Singh did not stop here. Being over-ambitious he went on advancing into Tibet because Tibetans did not offer much resistance, and wanted Sikh General to first exhaust himself before they dealt with his force. The General was caught in their trap. His forces had been thinning as he had to guard his rear also and due to disturbed circumstances at home could not expect much reinforcements.

Ultimately, there was collision with the Chinese and the Tibetans gave him a battle in the first week of December, at an altitude of 13000 feet. The battle continued for 3 days during which Zorawar Singh himself was killed on 12 Dec. 1841. The Tibetans took a heavy toll of Sikh army, and the survivors returned to Ladakh.

The three main reasons for General Zorawar Singh's defeat were: **Firstly**, his recruiting Ladakhis, Balties and Dogras, with very little Sikh representation, for the Tibet expedition, [culturally, linguistically they felt one with Tibetans, and not with their General]. **Secondly**, no support came from Lahore as Maharaja Nau-Nihal Singh was a minor and all his Generals were busy in conspiracies in eliminating each other. **Thirdly**, ignoring the advice of the wise Maharaja Ranjit Singh, he provoked a mighty power of Asia, viz, China. The result was catastrophic.

Maybe the General was over-ambitious and wanted to set-up an independent Sikh state in Tibet and W. Nepal. Though the bold attempt failed, in the conquest of Tibet, it succeeded in winning "The Great Himalayas so far considered unsurpassable - A rare victory indeed."

