

# The First Outbreak of Indian Nationalism: The Khalsa and the Raj, (1845-46 and 1848-49)

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Punjab had been the last bulwark of resistance against the progress of *British imperialism that swept the sub-continent of India. Till his last breath Maharaja Ranjit Singh had determinedly barred their way.* His death in June 1839 triggered off a spate of overt statecraft in the opportunist English camp to spread their influence in the country. On the one hand they were busy spreading canards against the heirs of the Maharaja, attacking their legitimacy, or their chastity (if the royal personage happened to belong to the fairer sex); on the other hand they were themselves harbouring some of these contestants for power to destabilize the political horizon. Rival factions in the Lahore *Durbar* received the secret encouragement or even the active aid of the British across the Sutlej river that marked the Kingdom's eastern frontier under the Treaty of Amritsar, resulting ultimately in the secession of the fertile province of Kashmir which Maharaja Ranjit Singh had conquered for the Punjab. The royal personages or the *Durbar* dignitaries were so engrossed in protecting their own interests that they failed to counter these subversive attempts of the British. The only strong force to raise its voice against the petty -fogging absurdities in the *Durbar* was the *Khalsa* Army, which claimed to act as the representative of the entire community (*Sarbat Khalsa*) and virtually guided it through the critical years of 1845-46 and 1848-49 till it received the stab in the back from its *Purbiah* (easterner) and Dogra leaders.

**Strategy:** The *Khalsa* Army had been raised by Ranjit Singh from among the remainder of the *misl sawars* (band of horsemen) whom he had put down when he emerged as the most successful among them. The Maharaja was ever receptive of any form of superior martial arts that he came across, and the *sowars* were soon made to discard the bows and spears and take to matchlocks. Contact with the British Army under Lord Lake in 1805 made him conscious of the importance of regular infantries. From this time onwards he began to raise battalions of regular infantry with uniforms, equipment and a fixed salary. The highest officer was a commandant and an Adjutant with subordinate ranks of officers below. The men were paid by *paymasters* or *munshies* after *mutsuiddies* or clerks had made it sure that they were present. The cohesive spirit of the *Khalsa Panth* was sought to be maintained by attaching a Granthi to each regiment who would read out the Granth (the Guru Granth Sahib or the religious book of the Sikhs) to the soldiers every day.

**Statecraft:** The Delhi Gazette of 1835 contained some details of Ranjit Singh's infantry. They numbered 34 battalions in that year and 12 more were being formed at that time. A foreign traveller in the Punjab put the number of the infantry at 40 battalions, each of which contained a rank and file of 1000. Military personnel with experience of service in European armies were often employed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh to train the Sikhs. Among these generals like Allard, Ventura, Court, Avitabile and Cortlandt, some of them were veterans of the Napoleonic Wars. **The physical prowess and the power of endurance of the Sikhs**

were always highly spoken of by European observers. "They were brought up in the great school of war and in that struggle for existence", remarked Lt. Col. R.G. Burton of 94<sup>th</sup> Russell's Infantry, "which by the law of nature involves the survival of the fittest". Another European traveller has also spoken in admiration of them: 'They are capable of enduring the fatigue of long marches for several days in succession; so that it has become a byword that the Punjabi have iron legs.... On their marches they encamp very regularly; and I saw 30,000 men, the Army of Peshawar, moved with as much facility as a single regiment in this (the British) side of the Sutlej. No wheeled carriage is allowed and their own bazaars contain all they require.'<sup>1</sup>

The regular cavalry of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the famed '*Ghorcharas*' numbered 15,000 over and above the levies of various *Sardars*, which Burton estimated at 80,000 men. However, the equipment of this cavalry did not impress Burton much. To quote him –

"The cavalry appear to have been very badly mounted and equipped. The Maharaja had some very good field guns, but his battering train was of no value. The guns were badly horsed, the animals were undersized, and the harness was of an inferior description."<sup>2</sup>

Burton also had much to say against the muskets of the Sikhs, which according to him were : "Of very inferior stamp, incapable of throwing a ball to any distance, and on quick and repeated discharges liable to burst; their firing is bad, as their sole object appears to be to aim at a regular and simultaneous volley, punishment awaiting any, the report of whose piece is a second too late. The consequence is, in their hurry to deliver their fire as one report, they never bring their muskets to the proper level and their cartridges are all thrown upwards at an angle of about 30 degrees".<sup>3</sup>

**Moral Fervour:** But the strongest point of distinction about the Sikhs was the moral fervour with which they had been infused by the philosophy of Guru Nanak. The Sikhs had grown into a historical community through a series of agrarian conflicts with the state. **Guru Nanak's message of equality had succeeded in reconciling the influx of new migrants from across the mountain passes in the frontier land of Punjab into the mainstream of Punjabi society dominated by Bramhanic exclusivism.** The Jats who were on their way from pastoralism to sedentarisation at this stage found a niche in the contemporary social system through the mediation of this new philosophy. **The cohesive spirit of this new creed also succeeded in mobilizing them against the rapacity of the Mughal state. This inheritance of a tradition of combining the elemental simplicity of an agrarian life with a dogged militancy against the depredations of the state marked the members of the *Khalsa*.** This undaunted spirit of the *Khalsa* drew accolades from writers and observers like J.D. Cunningham —

"In truth the Sikh owes his excellence as a soldier to his own hardihood of character, to that spirit of adaptation which distinguishes every new people, and to the feeling of a common interest and destiny implanted in him by his great teachers."<sup>4</sup>

European observers, like George Campbell, drew clear contrasts between the common *sowar* in the *Khalsa* army, who alternated between his life in a village community governed by the *punchayats* (representative elders) and his service in an army barrack and the old Sikhs of the Durbar spoilt by a "long course in idleness and opium."<sup>5</sup> Towards the close of Ranjit Singh's rule, and still more after his death, the great chiefs had acquired lucrative forms of hereditary and additional *jagirs* besides many new grants for which they did not have to perform any immediate service. The end of Ranjit's rule saw about a Crore left for the conduct of Durbar expenses and for the payment of donations to the army. But even this sum was being fast eaten into by the Durbar dignitaries. "Between the chiefs and the regular troops therefore," it was noted by Broadfoot, the Agent of the Governor General in

the North West Frontier, in a letter of 30 December 1844, "there was ill will hardly disguised."<sup>6</sup>

**Intrigue:** This disjuncture between the *Khalsa* and the Durbar chiefs (many of whom had been hand-picked by Ranjit Singh for their talents and competence regardless of their loyalty to the spirit of the *Khalsa*) would have continued in its own way but for the unexpected whirlwind of political mishaps shaking the *Sarkar Khalsaji* to its roots following the passing away of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The Maharaja's only acknowledged son was Kharak Singh whom he had nominated as his successor. But the wily Dogra minister Dhian Singh, who had monopolized the reins of government in the declining years of the Maharaja spread a canard that the heir apparent was an imbecile. Dhian Singh manoeuvred things in such a manner that the would-be Maharaja's self confidence was totally broken and he started breaking erratically, allowing Dhian Singh to concentrate all powers in his own hands. On the death of the Maharaja, Kharak Singh tried to get out of this situation by trying to bolster up his household through one Chet Singh Bajwa, a kin through his in-law's side. Dhian Singh enlisted the support of Kharak Singh's son Nau Nihal Singh and assassinated Bajwa in a clean sweep on the night of 8<sup>th</sup> of October 1840. Kharak Singh did not long survive this assault on his prestige and, by a suspicious coincidence, the heir-apparent Nau Nihal Singh died on the same day while returning from the funeral of his father (November 15, 1840). Although the complicity of Dhian Singh could not be proved, it is common knowledge that his attempts to monopolise the reins of government in his own hands was not to the liking of the prince. Affairs could still have settled down if Nau Nihal Singh's mother Mai Chand Kaur would have been allowed to be the Queen Regent on behalf of Nau Nihal Singh's yet to be born heir expected by his wife Sahib Kaur. But the sway of the Sandhanwalia Sardars on the Mai could not be tolerated by the Dogra. **Dhian Singh now sent secret agents to the army barracks to rouse them against feminine rule.** Messages were also sent to Kunwur Sher Singh, the son of Ranjit and Mehtab Kaur, the daughter of Sada Kaur, but a son who was never acknowledged by his father. Sher Singh, was, however, quite popular with the army.<sup>7</sup>

The *Khalsa* Army now entered the centre stage of politics in the Punjab. **In a move, quite unprecedented in the history of contemporary times, it assumed the character of a democratic republic on an elective principle. The**

***Khalsa* tried to bring its experience of the village administration and life in self-governing rural communities by trying to elect *Punchayats*.** Each regiment tried to elect its own representatives and were allowed to send two of them to a larger *Punchayat* which was to determine on all policies and take important decisions involving political matters. In an assembly held in the house of Mohanlal Commandant, Kunwur Sher Singh had to declare himself as a servant of the *Khalsa*, who promised to fight for his cause. An army of 20,000 laid siege to the Lahore fort and caused a breach after a hard struggle.<sup>8</sup>

**Valour in Victory:** The discipline and self-restraint exercised by the army at this time won the admiration of the intelligence officers employed by the British Governor General's Agent to the North West Frontier. He mentioned how the army sent Nau Nihal Singh's battalion to maintain peace and security in the bazaars and the important thoroughfares. The local trading communities were convinced of the strength of the Kunwur's case and Lala Amreek Singh was found distributing two lakhs among the army for their arrears, promising three lakhs more.<sup>9</sup>

The self discipline of the army could, however, hardly hope to tame the machinations of the British Political Agent in the troubled waters of the Punjab. This was the time when the British Army passing to and from Afghanistan had secured the right of passage from

Peshawar to Rawalpindi to Hurreekhee Ghat in Ferozepur through 20 miles of Lahore<sup>10</sup> and Dhian Singh was found to pay a visit to the Camp of the British Army General. The British took advantage of their friendship with the new Maharaja to advocate the return of the Sandhanwalia Sardars. The result came quick. During a military parade in November 1841 Sher Singh was brutally murdered by his new found Sandhanwalia friends in league with his alienated minister Dhian Singh. The Dogra chief, however, did not survive his own plot and was soon put to death by his fellow conspirators leaving it to his son Heera Singh to avenge his death.<sup>11</sup>

The stage was now set for the emergence of the *Punchayats* of the army as “virtually the present governing power in the country”<sup>12</sup> and all the important state decisions had to be referred to them. **Heera Singh likewise had to take their mandate at every step as the servant of the *Khalsa* and all the decisions had to be stamped with the seal of the *Sarkar Khalsaji*.** To keep the army contented, Heera Singh had to mobilize the entire resources of the state for the payment of the army. The expansion of *jagirs* of the Durbar leaders was thus halted and Pundit Julla had to tread on the toes of many beneficiaries of earlier laxities. Julla’s most indiscreet act was the dismissal of a regiment of 500 in his eagerness to raise resources which proved to be his undoing.<sup>13</sup>

The army had forgiven Heera Singh’s instigation of the murder of his uncle Soochet Singh and his associate Rai Kesri Singh who had come to contest his claims to Viziership. They had winked at his allegations levelled on the Queen Mother Rani Jindan. They had colluded in his incitement to an assault on the camp of Bhai Beer Singh, a soldier turned ascetic, who had been serving as the rallying point of all rival interests challenging Heera Singh’s authority, like Kashmira Singh, another son of a wife of Ranjit Singh and the fugitive Sandhanwalia Sardar. Utter Singh Sandhanwalia had recently crossed over from Thanesur to Bhai Beer Singh’s camp with suspected English connivance. But the dismissal of their own numbers were not quietly looked on by them. Rumours of a sudden descent of hill men on Lahore were already rife. Rani Jindan tried to work up the anti Dogra sentiments in the camp. Heera Singh’s attempt to leave the capital and join Dogra forces near Shahdera was not looked upon well by the Army and he along with his tutor Julla had to give up their heads to be spiked on the *Khalsa*’s bayonets and shown around the streets of Lahore.<sup>14</sup>

It was now Rani Jindan’s turn to appease the army. She went to the cantonments herself with her son, the young Maharaja Duleep Singh and tried to conciliate the *Khalsa*. The *Khalsa* accepted her brother Jawahar Singh as the new minister. But Jawahar Singh’s lax morals peevd the army. His assassination of Koonwur Peshora Singh proved to be the last straw and he could no longer survive the wrath of the Army.<sup>15</sup>

Jawahar Singh’s death on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1845 brought Missar Lal Singh to the fore. But it was beyond his abilities to collect the revenue of the country regularly or pay the army. Attempts to collect the revenue from *zamindars* from beyond the Sutlej involved them in a controversy whether the *Khalsa* did have any sovereign rights in the territories beyond the Sutlej. Broadfoot, the English Agent argued that the *Khalsa*’s rights in these territories were no more than that of the other Protected States. The British had moreover, been fortifying their bases at Ferozepur and Ambala on the plea of the mutinousness of the Sikh army across the frontier. The *Khalsa* Panches therefore decided to cross on the other side of the Sutlej to recover their lost rights in the territories beyond the Sutlej.<sup>16</sup>

**Treachery Within:** The literature on the first Sikh war, penned mostly by the English, is more or less unanimous that the two commanders of this force – Lal Singh and Tej Singh were both disloyal to the *Khalsa* and had treacherous intentions. They could have swept up Ferozepur which was still not strong enough to withstand a bold *Khalsa* assault and

advanced towards Delhi.<sup>17</sup> The Governor General and the Commander in Chief were yet to reach Ambala. The forces from the rear (Meerut and Kanpur) had been ordered towards Kimna. The Sikh army could have taken a different route and reached Delhi. However, history is concerned merely with what actually happened and not with the might have beens. In reality, Raja Lal Singh waited near Ferozepur giving rise to the rumour (reported in several books by English authors like Burton and Ludlow) that he sought the advice of General Nicholson, who had advised him to wait.<sup>18</sup> The battles of Moodkee, Ferozeshahr and Sobraon followed as and when the English desired them, when Gough's forces were joined by Littler's in Ferozepur. Sham Singh Atariwala fought valiantly at Sobraon, as Ferozeshahr was fought by the common *Khalsa*, unaided by Lal Singh. Tej Singh returned to Lahore with his troops fearing that his retreat might be cut off by the English when Sham Singh Atariwala faced a martyr's death.<sup>19</sup>

**The surviving Dogra brother, Raja Goolab Singh was now to play his trump card in treachery. He came to Lahore and assumed the reins of government, denounced the action of the *Khalsa* and negotiated a treaty with the British.** The British claimed an indemnity of one crore and a half. The Lahore treasury contained only fifty lakhs. Goolab Singh now offered to pay the rest himself for the province of Kashmir.<sup>21</sup>

The British army was to evacuate Punjab before the year ended. The mortification of the defeat had, however, made the situation very grim. No one knew how popular emotions might work and the Queen Mother was prevailed upon to request the Resident and the British garrison to stay. The treaty of Bhyrowal was worked out in December, 1846 and the Resident was to hold the kingdom in trust for the child Maharaja Duleep Singh till he attained maturity.<sup>22</sup> This proved to be the prelude to British interference in revenue, customs and judicial matters of the country provoking yet another resistance from the people in 1848-49.

Henry Lawrence, the Resident, was not unaware of the mood of the country He had written to the Governor General on June 2, 1847—

“They have not lost their spirit.... A large majority of the disbanded soldiers have returned to the plough or to trade; but there are still very many floating on the surface of society; and such is the fickleness of the natural character, and so easily are they led by their priests and *pundits* and so great is their known pride of race and of a long unchecked career of victory, that if every Sirdar and Sikh in the Punjab were to avow himself satisfied with the humbled position of his country, it would be the extreme of infatuation to believe him, or to doubt for a moment that, among the crowd who are loudest in our praise, there are many who cannot forgive our victory or even our forbearance, and who chafe at their own loss of power, in exact proportion as they submit to ours.”<sup>23</sup>

Memories of the murder of Sir Alexander Burnes and the British debacle at Kabul were still fresh in men's minds and it was almost certain that the *Khalsa* spirit would assert itself once again. Relations with Deewan Moolraj, the *Kardar* of Multan had already been soured by the new British customs regulations depriving him of substantial salt revenue. The Resident's demand for arrears of his charge and the accounts of past ten years' collections drove him to desperation. Moolraj wanted to be relieved of his charge. General Kanh Singh Man was accompanied by two officers, P. Vans Agnew and Lt. Anderson in April 1848 to complete the task. The officers were cruelly murdered in a repeat performance of the Kabul drama. Rumours were spreading of the rise of a new Gooroo in the *manjha* on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Jeyt and the Sikhs were ready for a turn of the wheel of fortune.<sup>24</sup>

**Ferment:** Moolraj's rebellion was closely followed by the uprising of Chutter Singh Atariwala in Hazara who had fallen out with Abbott's policy of appeasing the local Muslim

populace. Chutter Singh tried to turn the table on the British by inviting the alliance of the disgruntled Barukzai Afghan king, Dost Mohammed. Chutter Singh was soon to be joined by his son Shere Singh and there was rebellion all around. Matters seemed to go completely out of hand as Lord Dalhousie wrote an anxious letter to his friend George Cooper on 18 April, 1848 –

“The spirit of the whole Sikh people was inflamed by the bitterest animosity against us - when chief after chief abandoned our cause, until nearly the whole army, led by *Sirdars* who had signed the treaties and by Members of the Council of Regency itself, was openly arrayed against us when, above all, it was seen that the Sikhs, in their eagerness for our destruction, had even combined in an unnatural alliance with Dost Mahomed Khan and his Mahomedan tribes.”<sup>25</sup>

Chutter Singh and Shere Singh the Attariwala *Sardars* were expecting to reap the harvest of the difficult battle of Chillianwala and negotiating the terms of a favourable treaty to undo the wrongs of 1846 when news of the explosion of the magazine in Mooltan and the breach of the fort in its wake arrived. Gough, the discredited commander in chief of Chillianwala had already been ordered to hand over charge to Robert Napier but before the order could reach him, Gough gathered all his forces to inflict the final stroke of Goojerat (February 1849). The Atari *Sirdars* could have crossed over across the frontier and come back with more forces for a second innings. But Goolab Singh Dogra proved cleverer than him. He simply blocked the passage of the *Sardars* and allowed Punjab to succumb to the backstabbing of Dogra treachery.<sup>26</sup>

**Conclusion:** In view of the renewed interest in the first stirrings of peasant nationalisms in India, the *Khalsa's* role in resisting the forward march of the British across the Indian sub-continent needs to be reassessed. When historians, like Christopher Bayly, are looking for a pre- history of nationalism and Eric Hobsbawm has brought up the concept of 'proto-nationalism', it is to be ascertained how exactly the *Khalsa* army's assumption of a democratic and elective posture is to be situated. While Guru Nanak's philosophy bound the *Khalsa* in a union of equality, Guru Gobind Singh had infused them with the spirit of steel. **When it came to the question of resisting the foreign conquerer, the *Khalsa* was the first to cross swords with him. The rest of India merely followed.**



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