

PUNJAB'S ROLE IN THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE 1857-58: AN ANALYSIS

Abstract

It is generally suggested that the province of the Punjab as a whole not only remained loyal towards the colonial power but also provided crucial support to it for quelling disturbance in other parts of the country. There is no denying the fact that the Punjab was not the centre of this struggle against the company's rule but there is ample evidence to suggest that the Punjab was not devoid of patriotic men who resisted the foreign rulers and rendered heroic sacrifices for the independence of their country. There were many who were prompted by the patriotic feelings and thus, struggled to drive alien rulers from their homeland. Although there is historiographical silence about the role of Punjab in the War but only a look on the volumes of the official Mutiny Records by the British officers is sufficient to falsify the popular impression regarding the Punjab's role in the War of Independence 1857-58. It shows that only the rulers and Maharajas of the Punjab's states supported the British, but the common people including the native sepoys rose against the British at many places.

Punjab's Role in the War of Independence 1857-58: An Analysis

During the decline of the Mughal Empire in the eighteenth century, the Punjab, like many other regions, had only a nominal affiliation with the centre. In 1730s, the Punjab became semi-independent, but it became completely sovereign state after 1799,¹ when Maharaja Ranjit Singh became the ruler of the Punjab. It is noteworthy that Ranjit Singh was nominated as ruler of the Punjab by Shah Zaman, the ruler of Afghanistan, not by the Mughal Emperor of Delhi.²

Maharaja Ranjit Singh annexed the semi-independent kingdoms of regional rulers within the boundaries of the Punjab, and established his government in the whole of the province stretching from Peshawar to Multan.³ He brought the scattered people of the Punjab under one banner. In the wake of his death in 1839, there started a period of anarchy in the Punjab. Taking benefit of the internal differences and weaknesses of the Sikh rulers, the British began to interfere in the political affairs of the Punjab. In spite of all intrigues and conspiracies, the people of the Punjab decided to defend their independence and resisted the British. From 1845 to 1849, the people of the Punjab fought fierce battles against the British at Mudki, Ferozshah, Aliwal, Sabraon, Multan, Chilianwala and Gujrat. In fact, it was the first War of independence against the British which was fought by the people of the Punjab. But unfortunately, at that time, not even a single regiment of the British Royal Bengal Army, which later revolted in 1857, rose up against the British. No single province or state of India sided with the Punjab in its resistance against the British imperialist power. If

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during these three or four years, the Punjab had succeeded in getting help from Delhi or from the people of other areas of India, the history of India would have been different. It can be said with certainty that if the Royal Bengal Army, which consisted of the people from Bengal to Delhi, had risen against the British during these four years (1845-1849), or at least had not joined the invading army, the Punjab would have defeated the British, and the history of Indian sub-continent would have been different and the people of this region could be saved from the atrocities of the British during or after the War of 1857-58.

The War of 1857-58, which shook the foundations of the British in India, was an important landmark in the history of the Indian Sub-continent. It is widely acknowledged as the first ever united resistance movement against the British rule in India, as both the Hindus and the Muslims participated in it. It was an expression of the country's struggle for independence after a century of foreign domination.

In 1849, the British succeeded in conquering and annexing the Punjab with the help of Purabiya sepoys (Hindustani sepoys).⁴ After annexation, the Purabiyas were offered jobs, whereas the people of the Punjab were denied their share in the jobs.⁵ From 1849-1857, the people of the Punjab suffered at the hands of the Purabiya soldiers and civil officials, who fought against them under the British in 1845-46 and 1848-49. In addition to this was the fact that the Punjab was being held with the help of the Purabiya regiments and Purabiya civilian subordinate officials in Lahore at the time of the War of 1857-58.⁶ Therefore, the Punjabi Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs perceived the Purabiyas as oppressors. When in 1857, differences grew between the Purabiya sepoys and the British, and the former rose up against the latter, the Punjabi elite generally sided with the British. At the same time, the British used the policy of divide and rule, and successfully exploited the differences between the Muslims and the Sikhs. The Muslims perceived the British as saviours, while the Sikhs perceived them as avengers against the Muslims. Therefore, leaving aside some exceptions, the rulers of the Sikh Princely States supported the British.

There were some basic factors which played an important role in convincing the chiefs and influential families of the Punjab to collaborate with the British during the War of 1857-58. Due to the grievances with the Sikh rulers, the Muslim chiefs of the Punjab helped the British and were rewarded. Similarly, rajas of the Sikh Princely States had sought protection from the British against the aggression of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, which the British granted to them, and, in return, the rajas promised to help the British in the hour of need according to the Treaty of 1809.⁷ In addition to this, the Sikhs were leaderless in 1857-58 and their important leaders had been either killed during the Anglo-Sikh Wars or were exiled from the Punjab.⁸

During the year of 1857-58 the immense production of crops also played an important role in pacifying the people of the Punjab. Similarly, some welfare-oriented developmental works in the Punjab by the British government from 1849 to 1857 created goodwill for the British among the people.⁹ The socio-economic conditions in the Punjab were different from the North-western Indian Provinces.¹⁰ The British did not confiscate lands in the former but they did in the latter.¹¹

The mutual rivalries and power politics among the different clans was also one of the causes of the collaboration of influential families with the British. The situation was that if a clan was with the freedom-fighters, its rival clan supported the British. Similarly, the ethnic conflict between the Punjabis and the Purabiyas was also cause of the collaboration. At the same time, the British successfully exploited the differences between the Muslims and the Sikhs. The Muslims of the Punjab perceived the British as saviours against the Sikhs, while the Sikhs perceived them as avengers against the Muslim rulers of Delhi. These were the factors, due to which a small section of the people of the Punjab collaborated with the British during the War of 1857-58.

The Punjab was not as loyal to the British as it is often depicted. The Punjab supplied men, money and materials to the British and sided with them, but it does not mean that it represented the sentiments of the entire population of the Punjab. It was the British rulers of the Punjab who supplied men and money to their comrades at Delhi. Eleven years earlier in 1846, John Lawrence, as revenue collector of District Delhi, had organized a siege train to reach Lord Gough, commander of the British forces, to enable him to win the decisive battle of Sabraon against the people of the Punjab.¹² In 1857, John Lawrence was the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab, who sent reinforcements to the British forces at Delhi. The pro-British attitude of the Sikh princes was not shared by the general masses in the Punjab.¹³ The scattered uprisings in the districts of Ludhiana, Jhajjar, Haryana, Sialkot, Ferozepur, Murree and Gugera, and sullen discontent at Amritsar, Lahore and elsewhere, strongly refute the myth of popular support received by the British in the Punjab during the War of Independence.

It is generally asserted that the Punjab remained undisturbed during the War of 1857-58. There arise some questions: if the province of the Punjab was calm and tranquil, then what forced the British to unleash a reign of terror, and why the British punished 5628 persons in the Punjab during the year of 1857-58, out of whom 2384 were executed, 1471 sentenced to imprisonment, 1501 flogged and 272 were fined?¹⁴ What prompted the British to introduce harsh and draconian laws, according to which licenses to carry fire arms were withdrawn, sale of lead and sulphur were prohibited, ferries were closely guarded, boats withdrawn, free movement of people restricted,¹⁵ strict mail censorship was introduced¹⁶ and the native press was put under strict and rigid surveillance?¹⁷ The answer of the above questions is that the Punjab was not as loyal, calm and tranquil as it is often painted. Like other areas, in the Punjab too, there were murders, mutinies, incendiaries, conspiracies, disloyalties, disarmings, battles, executions, pursuits, panics and treacheries.¹⁸ In spite of all oppressions and restrictions, the movement for freedom among the people of the Punjab could not be suppressed in its entirety, and at various places like Gugera, Murree, Sialkot, Jhelum, Lahore, Jhajjar, Ludhiana and Haryana, the people and the sepoy rose against the British government when they found the circumstances favourable to their cause.

The people of the Punjab rose against the British at a number of places on a large scale but the circumstances in the Punjab were different from the North-western Indian Provinces. The events at Meerut and Delhi occurred suddenly and the British were not ready to react, but in the Punjab the authorities had been

warned and alerted by telegraphic messages about the events of Meerut and Delhi, and they took the sepoys by surprise when they were getting ready to revolt. In the Punjab, the spirit of rebellion was forcibly kept down.¹⁹

The critical nature of the situation in the province conspicuously stands out by the fact that lack of finances, arms and munitions, proper means of communications, and the presence of an artillery-equipped large European army and, above all, unleashing of a reign of terror by the administration of John Lawrence, one and all, failed to curb the anti-British sentiments of the people of the Punjab.²⁰ Whenever and wherever possible, they rose against the British in order to oust the imperialist power.

The evidence of uprisings and discontent in the various parts of the Punjab against the British, based upon official records and reports, suggests that disaffection was fairly wide-spread in the Punjab.²¹ The fact is further corroborated by the ruthless repressions and the reprisals resorted by the British authorities during and immediately after the War of 1857-58. The toll of the sufferings and sacrifices of the common people of the Punjab as a result of ineffective resistance, as stated in the official record and reports, is by no means insignificant.²²

The facts belie the assumption that the common people of the Punjab rallied to the cause of their British masters. Even from a brief survey of the happenings in the Punjab during the War of 1857-58, it would be evident that valiant spirits were not wanting who staked their lives for the sake of independence, or paid the heaviest price in their bid for freedom in the form of death, and confiscation or destruction of all their worldly possessions. Ahmad Khan Kharal, Sarang Kharal, Bahawal Fatiana, Murad Fatiana, Walidad Murdana, Mokha Vehniwal, and Nadir Shah Qureshi of Gugera,²³ Rasul Bakhsh, Amir Ali and Saiyyid Karam Ali of Murree,²⁴ Nawab Abd al-Rahman of Jhajjar and Nawab Ahmad Ali Khan of Farrukhnagar sacrificed their lives for the freedom.²⁵ Nawab Bahadur Jang Khan of Bahadurgarh was exiled to Lahore and his property was confiscated.²⁶ Hundreds of the freedom-fighters of the Gugera Movement as well as of other areas were exiled to Andaman Islands, popularly known as 'Kala pani', where they faced death in very miserable circumstances.²⁷ Murad Fatiana, Walidad Murdana, Mokha Wehniwal and Nadir Shah Qureshi, heroes of the Gugera Movement and Rao Tulla Ram, a hero of the War of Independence in Haryana region,²⁸ never surrendered to the British in spite of many attractive offers by the latter. The names of these freedom-fighters are still respected by the people of the Punjab. After one hundred and fifty years of the War of 1857-58, their names are alive in the memory of the people through folk songs of the region.²⁹

It is generally suggested that the province of the Punjab as a whole not only remained loyal towards the colonial power, but also provided crucial support to it for quelling disturbances in other parts of the country. The reason of such assumption is that no serious attempt has been made so far to analyze the myriad factors which shaped the respective responses and reactions of different regions, classes and communities in the country during the War against the alien

administration. We do not find even a single comprehensive book about the role of the Punjab during the War.³⁰ It is true that the War in the Punjab was not fought on a large scale, as it was in Northern or Central India, but it is also a fact that the people of the Punjab resisted the British rule. In some areas, such as Gugera, Murree, Jhajjar and Haryana, they fiercely resisted the British.

There is no denying the fact that the Punjab was not the centre of this struggle against the Company's rule, but there is ample evidence to suggest that the Punjab was not devoid of patriotic people, who resisted the foreign rulers and rendered heroic sacrifices for the independence of their country. There were many who were driven by patriotic feelings, and thus struggled to oust alien rulers from their homeland. Although there is a historiographical silence about the role of the Punjab in the War, only a cursory glance on the volumes of the official Mutiny Records³¹ (Mutiny Reports, Vol. VIII in two parts and Mutiny Correspondence, Vol. VII in two parts) sent by the British Deputy Commissioners to Commissioners, and by the Commissioners to the Chief Commissioner is sufficient to falsify the popular impression and assumption regarding the collaboratory role of the Punjab in the War of Independence 1857-58. These records reveal that it was only the rulers and Maharajas of the Punjab's states who supported the British, while the common people, as well as the native sepoy, rose against the British at many places. Robert Montgomery, the Financial Commissioner in the Punjab during 1857-58, mentions twelve places where the sepoy rose against the British. These twelve places are the following:³² (i) Ferozepur, May 14, large portion of 45th and 57th Native Infantry, (ii) Hoti Mardan, May 21, 55th Native Infantry, (iii) Jullunder, June 7, 6th Light Cavalry, 36th and 61st Native Infantry (iv) Phillour, June 8, 3rd Native Infantry. (v) Jhelum, July 7, part of 14th Native Infantry, (vi) Sialkot, July 9, Wing of 9th Light Cavalry and 46th Native Infantry, (vii) Thanesar, July 14, part of 5th Native Infantry, (viii) Lahore, July 30, 26th Native Infantry, (ix) Ferozepur, August 19, 10th Light Cavalry, (x) Peshawar, August 28, 51st Native Infantry, (xi) Ambala, September 30, remnants of 5th and 60th Native Infantry and (xii) Mianwali, in District Leiah, 30 men, 9th Irregular Cavalry. Large portion of the civil population of the Punjab made efforts to get rid of the foreign rule. The struggle in District Gugera (Multan Division)³³ and that of Murree (District Rawalpindi)³⁴ are noteworthy.

The response and attitude of the princes and nawabs towards the British should not be generalized as the expression of the opinion of the entire province. These rulers were not the true representatives of the wishes of the people. Ahmad Khan Kharral, Bahawal Fatiana, Murad Fatiana, Muhamand Kathia, Lal Kathia, Nathu Kathia, Nadir Shah Qureshi, Walidad Mardana and Salabat Tarhana, of the Gugera Movement, Rasool Bakhsh, Ameer Ali and Karam Ali of the Murree Movement, Rao Tulla Ram of Haryana and Shah Abdul Qadir of Ludhiana etc.³⁵ were popular leaders of the people in their respective areas in the Punjab, who led the resistance movement at various places in the province. They were neither rulers, nor sepoy, but were freedom-fighters. They had no personal grievances against the British. Neither their *jagirs* were confiscated, nor were their pensions stopped. They fought for a noble cause which was to eliminate foreign rule from their homeland. This view is very much evident from the letters written by the

freedom-fighters to the Nawab of Bahawalpur,³⁶ and to a native Muslim officer in the British army, Woordie-Major Mir Barkat Ali.³⁷

The historians have interpreted the role of the Punjab during the War of 1857-58 in the framework of elite approach. They generalized the collaboratory role of a few rajas, nawabs and feudal lords to the role of the entire population of the Punjab, which is misleading. They did not highlight the role of the masses who resisted the British. Therefore, there is a need to bring the role of the people of the Punjab to forefront, in addition to the role of the elite, in order to appreciate and assess the response as well the reaction of the people of the Punjab to the British.

References

¹ For details see G.L. Chopra, *The Punjab as a Sovereign State* (Lahore: Al-Biruni, 1977 rpt., First Pub. 1929).

² J.D. Cunningham, *History of the Sikhs* (New Delhi: Chand & Co., 1955 rpt., First Pub. 1852), 115.

³ He was an ambitious and expansionist ruler. He snatched the areas from many Muslim rulers: Jhang in 1804 from Ahmed Khan Sial, in 1807 Kasur from Qutb al-Din Khan and District of Dera Ghazi Khan from Nawab of Bahawalpur, Malerkotla in 1808 from Ata Allah Khan, in 1810 Sahiwal (now in District Sargodha) from Fateh Khan and Khushab from Zafar Khan, Bhimber in 1812 from Sultan Khan, Multan in 1818 from Nawab Muzaffar Khan, Kashmir in 1819 from Sardar Jabbar Khan and Azim Khan, and Peshawar in 1834 from Khattak Chief, Sultan Muhammad Khan.

⁴ The greater majority of the sepoys recruited in the army of British East India Company came from the plains of Hindustan, particularly from the eastern (*purabi*) region, between Bihar and Agra. This gave them the name, 'easterners', *purabiyas* or *poorbeahs*, as the British called them.

⁵ Frederic Cooper, *The Crisis in the Punjab* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1858), 228; and From R. Temple, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner Punjab, to G.F. Edmonstone, Secretary to the Government of India, No. 75-322, Lahore, May 25, 1858 in *Punjab Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II (Lahore: Government of the Punjab, 1911), 360.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Cunningham, *History of the Sikhs*, 406-7.

⁸ Many of their leaders had perished in the military upheavals and the two Sikh Wars which followed the death of Ranjit Singh. Those living were either prisoners or pensioners. Sher Singh was a prisoner at Calcutta, Dalip Singh, the son of Ranjit Singh, had embraced Christianity, Teja Singh was a pensioner and Bikram Singh was a prisoner within his own holy city.

⁹ The Board of Administration in the Punjab, and particularly Chief Commissioner John Lawrence, spent huge money on public works, which played an important role in pacifying the people of the Punjab. From 1849 to 1857 four million sterling pounds had been expended on public works in these territories. *Punjab Administration Report 1856-57 and 1857-58*, 33.

¹⁰ Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, *The Causes of the Indian Revolt* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000 rpt. First Pub. 1858), 78.

¹¹ Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty* (Lahore: Sang-i-Meel Publications, 2001), 34.

¹² Harold Lee, *Brothers in the Raj: The Lives of John and Henry Lawrence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹³ For details see Dolores Domin, *India in 1857-59: Study in the Role of the Sikhs in the People's Uprising* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1977).

¹⁴ *Punjab Administration Report 1856-57 & 1857-58* (Lahore: Government of the Punjab, 1859), 9.

¹⁵ Robert Montgomery and Richard Temple, *Selections from the Public Correspondence of the Administration for the Affairs of the Punjab*, Vol. IV, No. 1 (Lahore: Government Printing Press, 1859), 16, 42, 48 & 57; Sydney Cotton, *Nine Years on the North-west Frontier of India* (London:

- Richard Bentley, 1868), 163-64; and S. Dewe White, *A Complete History of the Indian Mutiny* (Weston: Super-Mare, 1885), 52.
- ¹⁶Montgomery & Temple, *Selections from the Public Correspondence*, 6, 19, 41 & 57; *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 201 and Part I, 391; and *Punjab Administration Report 1856-57 & 1857-58*, 13.
- ¹⁷*Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 201-2; and *Punjab Administration Report 1856-57 & 1857-58*, 13.
- ¹⁸Cooper, *The Crisis in the Punjab*, 243-44.
- ¹⁹Karl Marx, *The First Indian War of Independence* (Moscow; Foreign Language Department, 1978), 88.
- ²⁰Salahuddin Malik, 'The Punjab and the Indian Mutiny: A Re-assessment' in *Islamic Studies*, 1976, Vol. XV, No. 2, 102.
- ²¹For details see *Punjab Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, 2 Parts (Lahore: Government of the Punjab, 1911).
- ²²*Punjab Administration Report 1856-57 & 1857-58* (Lahore: Government of the Punjab, 1859), 9.
- ²³See details in , Report from Lieutenant N.W. Elphinstone, Assistant Commissioner (late in charge of District Gugera), to Major G.W. Hamilton, Commissioner Multan Division, No. A., Camp Tibbi, January 30, 1858, in *Punjab Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 40-78.
- ²⁴For details see, Enclosure (3) to 39, From J.W. Macnabb, Officiating Deputy Commissioner Jhelum, to E. Thornton Commissioner Jhelum Division, No. 113, Jhelum, February 1, 1858, in *Ibid.*, Part I, 383-400.
- ²⁵*Imperial Gazetteer of India 1909*, Vol. 6 (Calcutta: Government Press, 1912), 194; and Suresh K. Sharma, *Haryana: Past and Present*, Vol. 1 (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2005), 114.
- ²⁶Sharma, *Haryana: Past and Present*, Vol. 1, 114; and *Imperial Gazetteer of India 1909*, Vol. 21, 211-13.
- ²⁷*Proceedings of the Judicial Department*, November 13, 1858, Nos. 60-61.
- ²⁸For details see, Kirpal Chandra Yadav, *Rao Tula Ram: A Hero of 1857* (Rewari: Rao Tula Ram Samarak Samit, 1965).
- ²⁹A.D. Ejaz, *Kal Bulendi* (Lahore: Pakistan Punjabi Adabi Board, 1985).
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- ³²Enclosure to 71, Report by R. Montgomery, Judicial Commissioner for the Punjab, to R. Temple, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner for the Punjab, No. 149, Lahore, March 24, 1858 in *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 199-200.
- ³³See details in, Report from Lieutenant N.W. Elphinstone, Assistant Commissioner (late in-charge of District Gugera), to Major G.W. Hamilton, Commissioner Multan Division, No. A., Camp Tibbi, January 30, 1858, in *Ibid.*, 40-78.
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- ³⁶Enclosure (1) to 219, Translation of a petition from Muhamand, Nuthu, Murad, Amir and Lal Kathias, and Bahawal Fatiana and Salabat Tarhana, zamindars of District Gugera, to the Nawab of Bahawalpur in *Mutiny Correspondence*, Vol. VII, Part II, 211. Letter is not dated.
- ³⁷J. Cave-Browne, *Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. II (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1861), 215-16.