
Maharaja Duleep Singh's Russian Connection: A Threat to the British Raj?

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Duleep Singh (1838-1893) was the youngest son of the Maharaja of the Punjab, Ranjit Singh. He was placed on the throne of the Sikh state in 1843 after the death of his father in 1839 and his elder brother. His mother Rani Jindan was declared his Regent. The successors of Ranjit Singh lost the two Anglo-Sikh wars, of 1845-1846 and 1848-1849. The Treaty of Lahore was concluded between the ruler of the Punjab and the English East India Company. Under the provision of the Treaty, the Company annexed the Punjab. Duleep Singh was dethroned, deprived of his power; his lands and other property and the treasury were confiscated. The English East India Company granted him a life pension of 4,00,000 to 5,00,000 rupees per year. Later on, the Company twice reduced the amount of pension payable to Duleep Singh.

From 1850 to 1854 Duleep lived in Fatehgarh in the independent kingdom of Oudh (modern Uttar Pradesh) in north India. An English teacher accompanied him; this gentleman did his best to bring up the Punjabi boy as an Englishman and tried hard that the young boy forgot that he was a ruler of an independent kingdom. Under the influence of the teacher, Duleep Singh in 1853 converted to Christianity and became Protestant.

In 1854, at the age of 16, Duleep Singh went to England to continue his education. In London he enjoyed the favor of Queen Victoria, he became a member of her court circle. A big mansion was rented for him; Duleep Singh arranged his household in British style; his dishes, dresses and manners were blind imitation of dishes, dresses and manners of British landed gentry. He moved into the highest social circle and became a real dandy. He held balls and threw evening parties. He loved hunting with hounds in company of friends.

In 1859 Duleep decided to visit his Motherland, to see his mother Rani Jindan and to enjoy hunting. But he was not allowed to go to the Panjab. While he was in Calcutta, some Sikh soldiers gathered outside the hotel, he was staying in. They wanted to have a look at their ex-Maharaja. The British authorities took the incident to mean that he was still considered by his countrymen as their ruler.

Rani Jindan narrated to him many stories about the Punjab, about Anglo-Sikh wars and about an old prophesy of Guru Gobind Singh. According to the prophesy Guru's next incarnation would be a person with the name of Dipa (almost the same as Duleep), who would be married to a Christian girl and who would participate in a war between a bear (Russia) and a bulldog (Great Britain). At first he would come off second-best, but at the end he would emerge victorious and rule over the whole of India.

Duleep Singh was impressed; he developed interest in the situation prevailing in his Motherland. After his return to London he became an ardent student in the library of the British Museum where he learnt a lot about Punjab, about his great father and how he had been robbed of his kingdom by the Englishmen.

When the question of his marriage came up, Duleep Singh rejected the proposal of the Queen; he stuck to his personal choice. That was the first time when Duleep Singh showed that he was not a puppet. He married a Christian girl, half German, half Arab. They raised a big family; he continued the life of a rich dandy. He lived beyond his means. After the curtailment of his pension, he got into debt. He then declared that the British rulers were unjust to him.

1860s, 70s and 80s were the years of "Great Game" in Central Asia marked by confrontation of two empires, Russia and Great Britain, both trying to dominate the Asian continent. The conquest of Central Asia Khanates was considered by British Government as the first step towards the security of its most valuable colony in south Asia, India.

Among Indians there was a strong belief that freedom from British yoke would come from the North. News about Russian Tsar coming nearer and nearer to the boundaries of India spread all over the country. Kashmir and the Punjab were nearest to the boundaries of the Russian Empire. The talk about the forthcoming march of

Russian army towards the Punjab was popular, especially among the Namdharis.

The Namdhari started in 1870 but at this point its influence was insignificant. An organized revolt of the Namdharis took place in 1872. The colonial administration crushed the revolt ruthlessly. Baba Ram Singh (1815-1888), head of the Namdhari sect, and some of his close associates were arrested. His direct guilt and participation in the organization of the revolt could not be proved. The British government sentenced him to exile in Rangoon (Burma, now Myanmar). In 1879 Guru Charan Singh, a highly respected person by the Namdharis, was sent with a letter of Baba Ram Singh to the Governor General of Turkistan: "Merciful and virtuous Guru I write. From Baba Ram Singh — to the Russian sovereign I am sending the Provincial head associate from whom you can know about everything. His name is Guru Charan Singh. Guru Govind Singh foretold that in 1238 Sant Khalsa will appear. We will be liberated from Aurangzeb and then suddenly the English will start tormenting us. Then the people [would] call Russians [who would] appear and would vanquish the English. The Russian hero shall win."

The predictions of Guru Baba Nanak say: 'I shall be reincarnated. The defender of the true faith will come forth and will wage an untiring war. There will come an end for Shishnag — the symbol of evil. There shall be no end to Brahma and Vishnu — the symbols of truth and goodness. And thus shall it be forever. ...'.

The prophesy of Guru Baba Nanak Singh says: "You should protect us, 315 000 Sikhs will be at your disposal. Others can be called too. Whenever you come and are willing we are ready. Other Sikhs have also requested this. When Guru Gobind Singh was asked where the mentioned battles would be fought, the Guru answered: 'The first in the mountains of Kabul, the second — in Kabul itself, the third — in Jamrudh, the fourth — in Peshawar, the fifth in Jammu, the sixth — in Lahore, the seventh in Ferozpur, and the eighth — in Ludhiana'."¹

The arrival of Guru Charan Singh caused great interest among Russian authorities in Turkistan. The assistant of the Head of the Zaravshan district, Colonel of the General Staff N.I.Korolkov met him and spoke to him on several occasions. From these discussions it was clear that the task of bringing the

letter had been assigned to Guru Charan Singh as a person who 'Well knew about the feelings and the relations of the Indian nations to the English, and also part of the way to the Russian territories; he had been in Kabul'.²

The letter of Baba Ram Singh together with the notes of the discussion were sent to the Governor General of Turkistan K.P.Kaufmann, who at this time was in Petersburg. As ordered by K.P.Kaufmann Guru Charan Singh was given a reply. In the beginning of October 1879 Charan Singh left Tashkent for the Punjab.

In 1881 Guru Charan Singh was arrested as a political offender; he was deemed dangerous by the authorities as had acted as an emissary between the Namdharis and Russian authorities in Central Asia³.

But the arrest of Charan Singh did not put an end to correspondence between Baba Ram Singh and Russian authorities in Central Asia. In 1883 a certain Shankar Rai was arrested in Peshawar with a letter of Baba Budh Singh to General Governor of Turkistan⁴. Budh Singh was the brother of Ram Singh and had become the head of the sect after the arrest of Ram Singh.

Thus in 1870s and 1880s some public men in the Punjab corresponded with Russian administrators in Turkistan.

We do not know how much this affected the attitude of Duleep Singh to British rule in India.

In March 1886 Duleep Singh with his wife and six children sailed to India. Just before his departure he published in an Indian newspaper an appeal to his countrymen in which he declared his intention to take upon himself the responsibility for the fate of his people — the Sikhs. The Anglo-Indian Government considered this proclamation as disloyalty to England and his arrival to India as a threat to the security of the Empire. The British authorities in Aden arrested him. He sent his children and wife back to Great Britain and never saw them again.

In Aden, Duleep Singh declared that he rejected the allowance granted to him by the British Crown. On the 3 of June 1886 he left Aden for Paris. From Suez he sent a letter to the newspaper 'Times of India', in which he wrote that though the English Government did not allow him to go to India, it was not

in a position to close for him the road to his motherland, and he would somehow come to India.

In Paris Duleep Singh made friends with several Russians; the most important among them was his acquaintance with Cyon, a doctor by profession.

Cyon was very close to a leading journalist and a publicist Mikhail Katkov. Both of them promised their support to the Maharaja. Katkov's friendship was very important for Duleep Singh as the former was associated with the Tsar's court and was also an influential person. In Paris, Duleep Singh unwittingly found himself in the middle of European Politics.

Russia at that time was an ally of Germany and Austro-Hungary, but there was a party of Russian politicians, military men, journalists who wanted to change the foreign policy of their motherland in favor of France. Cyon and Katkov were among them. They hated Great Britain as she had granted political asylum to nihilists and bombers. Duleep Singh was considered by them as a person whose closeness to Russians would be extremely irritating to the British. The later might even consider this friendship as a threat to the security of the British Empire in the east⁵.

Duleep Singh first approached Russian ambassador E.E. de Staal and requested him to issue him a Russian Passport. Staal did not respond. Duleep Singh then turned to Kotsebu, the Counselor of the Russian Embassy in Paris.

The Maharaja wrote to him: "Since then though I was the most loyal subject of the Queen Victoria, I have been insulted and imprisoned at Aden (from where I have just returned) by the British Government at whose hands I have suffered great injustice. As the Indian administration has branded me with disloyalty, when I was not disloyal to them, therefore I now seek revenge.

While a prisoner on parole at Aden I re-embraced the faith of my ancestors. Therefore I have the support now 8 000 000 of my coreligionists and some 14 000 000 other inhabitants of the Punjab over the greater part of which both my father Ranjeet Singh and I myself when an infant ruled.

I now desire to pay my homage to His Imperial Majesty the Emperor of Russia in order to lay my service at his disposal.

For I am in rank one of the highest Princes in India. Besides the Government of India fear me as they would not allow me to enter India. Besides all the Indian Princes would rise if they had the least encouragement from the mouth of one of themselves, backed by Russia.”⁶

Duleep Singh did not receive any official answer; he did not get the Russian passport. Nevertheless at the end of March 1887 Duleep Singh came to Russia and lived in Moscow for some time under the name of Patrik Kazi, the Irish revolutionary (Fenian) with whom he was well acquainted and who gave the Maharaja his papers. That was of course a false step because everybody in Russia remembered the murder of Alexander II, the father of the ruling Tsar. There were several murderous assaults on Alexander III, the last was on 13 of March 1887 just before the arrival of the Maharaja. The Russian public disapproved such methods of struggle and was out of sympathy with the revolutionaries.

Duleep Singh believed an armed conflict between Russia and Great Britain to be inevitable; he offered his assistance to the Russian Government in conquering India. He wanted to go to the capital and meet Alexander III. Unfortunately, Mikhail Katkov, who promised to help, suddenly died and Duleep Singh found himself alone in Moscow, without support, without money. He even had to move to a cheaper hotel. He wrote to the Tsar in order to kindle his interest in campaign to India: “I guarantee an easy conquest of India. For, besides the promised assistance of the Princes of India with their armies, it is in my power to raise the entire Punjab in revolt and cause the inhabitants to attack in their war the British Forces sent to oppose Imperial Army.

My loyal subjects would also destroy all railways, telegraphic and other communications and blow up bridges and cut off all supplies while the revolting Princes would harass the British Troops left behind as a reserve. England is only strong at sea but she has no army. She has only some 100,000 Europeans and about the same number of native soldiers in her service in India. Out of the latter some 45,000 men are Punjabees who are the best soldiers that England possesses in India. All those are loyal to me will come over at once to the side of Russia (provided I be permitted to accompany the Imperial Army of invasion) should they be sent to confront the

Russian troops or they will attack the opposing British Forces in their rear should these Sikhs be left behind. Under these circumstances no British Army could hold its own however powerful it might be (which it is not) being attacked both in front and behind”⁷.

The Maharaja wanted to liberate his country with the help of Russian troops though his dreams would not realized. He stayed in Moscow but was not allowed to come to the capital and to meet the Russian monarch. He wrote several letters to the Tsar and to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, but to no avail. There is a remark with pencil by Alexander III on the top of one of them: "The Prince will get the official reply within a few days. I have no objection to his staying in Russia wherever he wants to live. I have read the report with great interest and of course sometime or other he would be useful for our dealings with the English in India"⁸. The Russian government did not have a concrete plan to deal with Duleep Singh and did not know how to use his stay in Moscow now or at some other time.

Duleep Singh was late in coming to Russia with his proposals for ordering the army to march to India. In 1878 there was a short period when such an action was feasible. After the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878 was over, Great Britain and Austro-Hungary refused to accept the Peace treaty of San Stefano. The Russian Empire was facing a new war in Europe. In order to escape it, Russian military authorities decided to arrange a march of the troops of Turkistan military region towards the borders of British India. The troops were stationed near the border of Bokhara Khanate. But after the Berlin Treaty was signed, the threat of war was over. The troops were withdrawn and returned to their headquarters. That was probably the only right moment to initiate the march of Russian army against the British Raj.

While in Moscow Duleep Singh was under strict surveillance of British diplomats in Russia. All their reports were sent to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, India House or to the Queen. British authorities were keenly interested in finding out all the details of the activities of the Maharaja in Moscow. On 14th November, 1887 the English Ambassador at St. Petersburg R. Morier wrote to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Marquis K.G. Salisbury: "Although it is not likely that

Dalip Singh will be able at Moscow to do us any mischief, I have thought it advisable not to lose sight of him, and have instructed our Vice-Consul in that city to keep me informed from time to time of his proceedings.”

“Mr. Hornstedt⁹ reports in a private letter received today that Dalip Singh, now residing with "Madame" (whether his wife or a mistress is meant is not clear)¹⁰, at the Hotel Billo a cheaper and more unpretending establishment than Dusseaux's where he formerly stayed. He visits a few Russian families, but lives in a very retired and quiet way”¹¹.

Another source of information about the Maharaja was Ada Wetherill, who made friends with the wife of Katkov's secretary, an Englishwoman. Ada was an outspoken person and sometimes gave away secrets of Duleep Singh to her. But the most reliable informer was a certain general Carrol-Tavis who was appointed to look after the Maharaja by the British government. They had met in Paris and became intimate friends. So intimate was their friendship that from the time they became friends, he was able to report each and every step of the Indian Prince to London. He was able to copy each and every letter written by Duleep Singh and send it to Great Britain.

The attitude of Russian government towards the Maharaja was clearly expressed in a secret letter dated 28th November 1887 of the Minister for Foreign Affairs N.K. Girs to the Governor General of Moscow V.A.Dolgorukov: “All his statements compel me to conclude, that Duleep Singh absolutely misunderstands his status in Russia and his relation to the Imperial Government, and so it is necessary to explain to him these misunderstandings.

The Maharajah arrived in Russia without soliciting prior permission under an assumed name, and for crossing through the border he had to avail himself of the guarantee of a stranger. Arriving in Moscow he petitioned for permission to settle anywhere in Russia as a private person under the patronage of the Imperial Government, and to this petition His Majesty, our Sovereign Emperor, was gracious to express his approval on condition, that the Maharajah would not violate the law of the Empire by his conduct. In view of these circumstances, Duleep Singh cannot be regarded a subject of Russia, and also to count him among our citizens seems to be all the most undesirable as,

afterwards he may regret his quarrel with the English Government, and desire to return to England, in order to again avail himself of the highly substantial amount of pension which he used to receive earlier, though in his opinion it was insufficient, and the loss of which we are not in a position to compensate. We know too little about the Maharajah to disregard the possibilities of such change in his views, which is why even from the point of view of the dignity of the Imperial Government, it would be far better not to associate Duleep Singh with Russia but to carry on regarding him as an honorable foreigner, who is compelled to seek asylum with us.”

“As regards the political objective pursued by the Maharajah for the liberation of India from the dominion of England with assistance from Russia... the project, as outlined in the letter received by me from him, seems to lack seriousness. The Maharaja insists that for the success of this affair it is enough to send a small sized Russian detachment to the border of India, to which he would have to be appointed as adviser and this provides reason to conclude that either he has a completely false idea about the state of affairs in Asia, or as a shrewd Asian he is calculating on our insufficient acquaintance with India and hopes to excite us to undertake a hostile demonstration against England, to make the British realize the disadvantages of their quarrel with him. However that may be, in the present political situation it would be absolutely futile and even imprudent to enter upon any negotiation with Duleep Singh on the topic of the aforesaid proposal and taking into consideration the above stated reasons the Sovereign Emperor was pleased to consider it necessary to entrust Your Excellency to clarify matters with him...”¹²

This was the official answer, approved by the Russian Monarch to Duleep Singh’s proposals. With the death of Katkov the Maharaja had lost the support of unofficial nongovernmental circles. Moreover the newspaper *Moskovskiye Vedomosti* (*Moscow Gazette*) published several articles about Russian politics in Asia. In one of them the author called the plan to conquer India by Russia a fable and wrote: "Russia does not have any grounds to aspire to an invasion of India and our forces may proceed to the frontiers and within the boundaries of Afghanistan, only when it will be provoked directly by the

activities of the English. Russia has never made threats either on the front or at the rear of England"¹³.

Another article was written in connection with the arrival in Petersburg of Lord Randolph Churchill who was a member of the House of Commons and former Secretary for Indian Affairs. In this article it was stated that during his stay in Russia His Lordship would succeed in fully satisfying himself of the absolute "absurdity of the alarmist theory of the English jingoists according to which Russia is a constant threat for the English Empire in India. He would find from us not even a trace of such a theory. In Russia it is known that India is the heel of Achilles of England. It is also known that against its will Russia would be compelled to threaten India only in a case where England appears to be an obstacle to Russia's accomplishing her centuries-old historical mission, which is as essential for her as the domain of the Indian Empire is essential for England. But if England does not interfere with Russia in Europe in that case none among us will even think of marching to India. Lord Randolph can see it with his own eyes"¹⁴.

As an honorable foreigner, but not as a citizen, Duleep Singh was allowed to live near Kiev. In May 1888 he left Moscow for his new home. The Maharaja was not satisfied with new quite life in the provinces and on 10th September 1888 left Russia for France. After this, he never visited Russia. In 1890, he had a stroke and became partially paralyzed. Duleep Singh appealed to the English Queen with the request to pardon him and he was pardoned. He died in Paris on 22nd October 1893.

Notes and References

- 1 Russo-Indian Relations: nineteenth Century. A selection of Documents (RIR). English Translation/ Ed. Purabi Roy. The Asiatic Society. Calcutta. 1999. P. 326-327.
- 2 Ibid. P. 328.

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- 3 National Archives of India (NAI), Foreign Dep., Sec. F., January 1884, № 40. P. 1.
 - 4 NAI, Foreign Dep., Sec. F., January 1884, № 40. P. 2-4.
 - 5 Rykov A.V. Myatejni Maharaja. (Rebellious Maharaja). Lipetsk. 2004. P. 85-90. (In Russian)
 - 6 RIR.P 359.
 - 7 Ibid. P. 364.
 - 8 Ibid. P. 366.
 - 9 Hornstedt Nicolas — the vice-consul of England to Moscow during this period.
 - 10 The person in question is Ada Wetherill (died in 1930), eighteen year old English girl with whom Duleep Singh became acquainted in Paris in 1886 and who later officially became his second wife giving birth to two children. His first wife Maharani Bamba died in 1887.
 - 11 NAI, Simla File copy, Foreign Dep., Sec., 1 January 1888, No. 11.
 - 12 RIR. P. 373-374.
 - 13 "Moskovskiye Vedomosti", N 314 of 14th November, 1887.
 - 14 "Moskovskiye Vedomosti", N 341 of 16th December, 1887.