

Disintegration of Sikh Empire

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ABSTRACT

The Sikh Empire was a powerful Indian State that emerged at the end of the 18th Century at a time when India was tormented both by repeated invasions from Afghanistan and the rapid territorial expansion of the British East India Company. Under the Charismatic leadership of Ranjit Singh, the Sikhs emerged the most powerful Indigenous State on the Subcontinent, creating an empire that lasted half century. In doing so, they ended the perennial Afghan threat from beyond the Khyber Pass, inadvertently serving as a useful buffer for Britain's Indian holdings. By the 1840s, however, the Sikh States through extensive target of British Imperialism as the Company set out to subjugate all of India to its writ. After two fiercely – Contested wars, the valiant Sikhs were defeated and the Punjab was absorbed into British India. This paper seeks to uncover the reasons. For this change in British Policy towards the Sikh Empires one that heralded the demise of a powerful bulwark against threats to Britain's Indian empire.

Key Words : Tormented, Perennial, Subjugate

INTRODUCTION

The Sikhs arose in the 15th Century as a movement focused on religious and social reform but after the executions of their 7th and 9th Gurus by the Mughals, they increasingly found themselves victims of imperial persecution. In response, Guru Gobind Singh organized the Sikhs into the Khalsa, a martial brotherhood based on egalitarian, republican principles and committed them to resist Mughal tyranny and forced Conversion to Islam. After his death, his disciple Banda Singh Bahadur took up the mantle of leadership and continued the struggle but his efforts incurred a fierce imperial backlash. In 1716, the Mughals captured and executed Banda Singh and scattered the Sikhs who faded from the political scene temporarily. The emergence of the Sikhs as a powerful force was greeted with alarm by the company. In 1757, the British acquired the province of Bengal and its enormous agriculture revenues, granting them their first major on the subcontinent. Over the rest of the century,

the company expanded its holdings on the subcontinent, defeating regional potentates like Tipu Sultan of Mysore and the Maratha Confederacy of the Deccan¹.

The Old Enemy – Sikh Versus Afghan:

In the period following the Afghan invasions of India, the strength of the Durrani has begun to wane. Zaman Shati presided over a diminution of Afghan power in the Punjab as the Sikhs concomitantly in power. In his efforts to shore up his power base, he alienated important clans by following his own Sadozai in positions of power².

Into this chaotic milieu stepped Ranjit Singh. He desired both the verdant province of Kashmir and the person of Shah Shuja, which saw as useful for his own geopolitical objectives on a raid into Kashmir in 1813, Ranjit Singh Shah Shuja who grateful wife presented him with the Kohinoor diamond. Nevertheless, this border between India and Afghanistan established by the Sikhs endured, being finally reified by Britain via the Durand Line in 18.

The Question of Sind:

Following Ranjit Singh's conquest of Kashmir and Multan, a gradual shift in British policy towards the Sikh State began. Over the early 1800s, Britain's strategic and commercial interests in the coastal province of Sind had grown substantially and they began to fear the Sikhs would contest the province as well as despite the Maharajas thus for strict abidance to the 1809 treaty. Some Hawkish Company Officials like Metcalfe, however were increasingly fertile over the Sikhs' rapid expansion and pushes. For aggressive British deployments across the Sutlej to curtail them, likewise, at the Lahore Durbar, many Sikh Sardars, buoyed the recent military successes were irritated by the Maharaja's positivity in the face of increasing British interference in Sind. When they begged him to annex Sind, he dryly reminds them of what happened to the Marathas when vast armies had been humbled by the British and the empire destroyed by foolhardy ventures^{3&4}.

Ranjit Singh knew how the British did things but he was wise enough to know, that for all his martial prowess, he could never challenge them over.

The Maharaja's Personal Life:

Ranjit Singh died in June 1839 at the age of fifty eight. Though a Sikh, he had created a State that unique for its time in secular nature. He talented Hindus, Muslims and even Christian Europeans to serve at his Court and train his army and honored all of their religious tradition equally. By the end of his reign, Ranjit Singh had restored peace and prosperity to a region that had known only ceaseless violence for a century and created a powerful state that stood as the last obstacle to British Supremacy in India. The great love of Ranjit Singh was women and he had large, marrying women of Sikh, Hindu and Muslim faith despite the opposition of the conservative Akali Takht, the Sikh religious establishment. After a mild stroke in 1831, he also took to smoking opium. In 1831, he suffered more strokes that paralyzed the right side of his body

confining him to his bed until his death a year later.

Sunset on the Lahore Darbar:

Ranjit Singh was succeeded by his eldest son, Kharak Singh in 1839. Weak-willed, he was a hopeless opium addict and beholden to his court favorite, the Knave Chet Singh. Chet Singh foolishly tried to use his influence over the Maharaja to dislodge the Dogras, whose connections at Court were as strong as ever.

A temporary Peace:

The victorious British delegation was received in person by the young.

Yet, even as he was ruthless in battle, he governed his multi-ethnic, multi-religious subjects equitably and effectively.

His successors laced his foresight and bravery, pandering to forces, the resorting to scheming to entrench their positions, all failing miserably, the Dogras, particularly Gulab Singh though legal to the Maharaja during his lifetime upon his death, seized the opportunity for Sikh aggrandizement, finally, the Institution of the Khalsa, the prime defender of the State. Once of Ranjit Singh's restraints, ran wild and brought about its own ignominious demise. Britain saw in Ranjit Singh reasonable interlocutor, who bore the costs at fanning the Afghans, by reducing them to impotency, he served British interests, when these interests were replaced by an uncompromising imperialist ambition in 1840, however, the Sikh Empire was loomed.

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