V-The Master Minds

Gulab Singh and the ‘Haramzadas’

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Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Sikh ruler who established the Sikh Empire and also firmed up the political boundaries of North India. (Right) The Dogra ruler, Gulab Singh who bought Kashmir from the British after the Sikh Wars and established his dynasty that would then rule Jammu and Kashmir till 1947. (Shiv Kunal Verma/ KaleidoIndia)

After having signed a Treaty of Friendship with the British in 1809, Maharaja Ranjit Singh had bought time in an effort to keep the fast growing British Empire at bay. By 1830, he was the undisputed ruler of the region between the Indus and the Sutlej Rivers–extending from Kashmir to the Punjab–and had politically established the boundaries of Northern India along defensible geographical lines. Considered by historians to be one of the most progressive Indian rulers ever, Ranjit Singh had a clear vision of what he wanted, and more often than not, he succeeded in getting it. Militarily, he may not have been the greatest tactician ever, but his success lay in the organizational execution of plans. A great student of military matters, he took great care in the selection of his generals and ministers and then backed himself on his judgements.

Pragmatic enough to realize that the Sikhs alone could not take on the British, Ranjit Singh concentrated on building a first class administrative system and an equally formidable modern army. Regardless of caste or creed, he went about recruiting the best fighting men that were available to him, and started manufacturing his own canon and ammunition in the foundries of Lahore. By then, he had an impressive array of

‘foreign consultants’ in the shape of French military generals from the defeated army of Napoleon, a few Germans and Italians, some Hungarian doctors and a sprinkling of other nationalities. He kept a very strict check on all of them, and beyond a point didn’t particularly trust them. ‘German, French, or English, all these European *haramzadas* (bastards) are alike,” he is reported to have said. Ranjit Singh’s crystal ball was obviously fairly accurate, for shortly after his death, when the Sikhs fought the British, none of the Europeans whom he had employed were there to fight on the side of the Sikhs, many having offered their services to the British.

The Ranjit Singh enigma had kept the British at bay from the north western frontiers of India. Victor Jacquemont, a French traveler who visited Lahore during Ranjit Singh’s rein commented that the "Maharaja’s conversations were like a nightmare. He asked a hundred thousand questions of me, about India and the British, Europe, Napoleon Bonaparte, the world in general and the next, hell, paradise, the soul, God, the devil and myriad of others of the same kind.’ His own army, both the infantry and the artillery in particular, drawing lessons from French and Italian models, were unrivalled for steadiness. Not too surprisingly, therefore, almost all British writings of that time advocated against taking on the Sikhs militarily. Ranjit Singh was statesman who out of anarchy and chaos had created order and stability and made Punjab a power to reckon with. Quite a few historical analysts can barely conceal their disappointment that Ranjit Singh chose to co-exist with the British rather than take them on militarily. His task was enormous, his time was short, and to make matters worse, his successors proved to be completely inept, taking a small fraction of the time it took to build the Sikh Empire to wreck it completely.

On the flip side, Ranjit Singh had all the sensual faults that are often associated with the Maharajas and their ilk of the times. Wine and women apart, he is reputed to have been a virtual addict of laudanum (a mix of morphine and opium). What was perhaps far more unfortunate, as the Sikh Empire began to take shape, Lahore was the epicentre of court intrigue and petty politics. More than anything else, this was to prove to be the undoing of the Sikhs when Ranjit Singh died in 1839. Past masters at exploiting even a glimmer of a chink in human relations, it was a matter of time before the British made their next move. Despite the treason and multiple crossovers that marked the subsequent Anglo-Sikh Wars, for a while it was touch and go for the British forces who just about managed to defeat the Sikhs.

Even during Ranjit Singh’s time, the Dogras had been a major force to reckon with. Born in 1792, Gulab Singh was the son of Kishore Singh, a distant kinsman of Jit Singh, the then Raja of Jammu. He first made a name for himself in 1808, when he fought alongside his clansmen in defending Jammu unsuccessfully against a Sikh Army sent by Ranjit Singh. Subsequently, in 1812 Gulab Singh enlisted in Ranjit Singh's army, becoming the commander of a Dogra cavalry contingent. He distinguished himself in several campaigns, including the conquest of Multan while also leading an independent campaign in 1816 to conquer the hill-town of Reasi. One thing led to another and Ranjit Singh, pleased by the services rendered by Gulab Singh, in 1820 bestowed the Jammu region as a hereditary fief upon Kishore Singh. A year later Gulab Singh also captured and executed one his own clansman, Dido Jamwal, who had been leading a rebellion against the Sikhs. In 1822, Kishore Singh died and Gulab Singh was confirmed the Raja of Jammu by his suzerain, Ranjit Singh.

Located on the flank of Kashmir, the Dogras had always been keenly interested in the developments in the Valley; the Sikhs had opened the door and in 1824 the Dogras moved to capture the fort of Samartah in Samba. Their alliance with the Sikhs continued unabated for in 1827 Gulab Singh along with the Sikh chief Hari Singh Nalwa took on and defeated an Afghan Army under Sayyid Ahmed at the Battle of Saidu. Gulab Singh's star continued to shine brightly and in 1831 Ranjit Singh bestowed on the former the royalty from the salt mines in northern Punjab and also control over some Punjabi towns like Bhera, Jhelum, Rohtas and Gujrat.

After the capture of Kishtwar in 1821, the Chenab River Valley came under Dogra control. Running east to west, the Chenab bisected the Pir Panjal and its upper reaches afforded access to the trans-Himalayan and Tibet regions without having to go through the Kashmir Valley which was at that time controlled by the Sikhs. In 1835, a Dogra army led by Zorawar Singh crossed the Great Himalayan Range via Umasi-La and arrived at Padam. From here they moved westwards, capturing the Suru River Valley and the small town of Kargil. In the next four years, the Dogras had the entire region of Ladakh and Baltistan under their control. These developments on Kashmir's eastern and northern flanks alarmed the Sikh Governor of Kashmir, Colonel Mian Singh, who felt that his own position in Skardu and Gilgit was being compromised. We shall return to Zorawar Singh and the eastern border of Ladakh in a subsequent article.

Ranjit Singh died in 1839 and was succeeded by Kharak Singh who was unpopular with almost all factions of the Lahore court. At the time, two major factions within the Punjab were contending for power and influence, the *Sandhanwalias* and the *Dogras*. Within months Kharak Singh was removed from power and replaced by his able son, Nau Nihal Singh. Kharak Singh soon died in prison and in one stroke, the entire power equation changed for Nau Nihal Singh also met his end when he was crushed under a falling archway at the Lahore Fort while returning from his father's cremation. In the accident, Gulab Singh's son, Udham Singh, was also killed. As the power struggle intensified, the Dogras succeeded in placing Sher Singh, an illegitimate son of Ranjit Singh, on the throne.

With the War of succession in Punjab at its zenith, the last thing Gulab Singh wanted was a confrontation with the Sikh Governor in Kashmir. Accordingly, Zorawar Singh was told to concentrate on Tibet to the east, which would help in nipping any potential confrontation with Lahore where the Dogra ruler was batting for higher stakes. In January 1841, Gulab Singh was at the forefront of events in the Punjab. As Sher Singh tried to seize the throne, those loyal to Nau Nihal Singh's mother, Chand Kaur, gave battle at Lahore under the command of Gulab Singh whose negotiating skills were perhaps unrivalled at that time. Not only was peace made between the two sides, Gulab Singh and his men were allowed to leave with their weapons. On this occasion, the Dogras are said to have taken away a large amount of the Lahore treasure to Jammu.

While Gulab Singh's own forces were fighting in Ladakh, he himself after initially opposing Sher Singh at Lahore, now headed for Peshawar. Before his death Ranjit Singh had signed a Tripartite Treaty in 1838 in which the Sikhs along with the British were committed to back Shah Shuja as the ruler of Afghanistan. With the Lahore Durbar caught up in its own machinations, most of the Sikhs were indifferent to the plight of the British troops stranded in Afghanistan. To compound the situation even

further, some Punjabi Muslim Regiments refused to fight their fellow Muslims from Afghanistan.

His fighting credentials apart, Gulab Singh's overall grasp of the strategic situation in northern India at that time was quite extraordinary. He chose to be extremely helpful to the British and took it upon himself to honour the Tripartite Treaty, thereby getting the British out of a tight spot. This earned him huge brownie points, to the extent that the British actually offered Gulab Singh possession of Peshawar and the valley of Jalalabad in exchange of Ladakh. This must have been an interesting proposition for the Dogras, for it would have been far more lucrative than control over a remote and barren landscape. However, this offer was turned down by Gulab Singh who felt that this would stretch his lines of communication from Jammu, running parallel as it were to the yet to be neutralized Sikh Empire. He politely declined the British offer, but he had already created a soft spot for himself and his Dogra Army in the British scheme of things.

Post 1841, events in Lahore were unfolding at a frenetic pace; the two brothers of Gulab Singh, Dhian Singh (the then Prime Minister of the Lahore Kingdom) and Suchet Singh were brutally murdered. Maharaja Sher Singh also didn't last long as he too was murdered and the infant Dalip Singh put on the throne with a Council of Regency, dominated by his mother, Ranichand Kaur, running the kingdom. Gulab Singh may well have also been assassinated but he escaped because he kept away from Lahore most of the time. In quick succession, Gulab Singh had lost his son and two brothers to the power machinations of the Lahore Durbar and he turned his attention to building his own power base in Jammu. As the Sikhs drifted towards a confrontation with the British in 1845, Gulab Singh ignored the call from Lahore to lead the Sikh Army– instead he chose to advise the Sikhs to avoid any confrontation with the British.

Though he chose to sit out the first Anglo-Sikh War as a neutral, Gulab Singh continued to be a major power player in Lahore. After the defeat of the Sikh Army at Subraon in February 1846, the Lahore Durbar again turned to the Dogra leader, giving him full powers to negotiate on their behalf. The British, very much aware of the fact that had Gulab Singh entered the first Anglo-Sikh War against them the end result may well have been disastrous, also knew that the Lahore Durbar had missed an opportunity by ignoring his advice. Gulab Singh had advocated at the time that the Sikhs avoid being drawn into any pitched battle, bypass the British troops, cross the Sutlej and strike at the virtually undefended Delhi instead with fast moving cavalry units. To befriend Gulab Singh further, hence, became even more important from the British point of view and they therefore dangled the carrot of recognizing him as the independent ruler of Jammu and Kashmir. The tacit implication of this offer was that Gulab Singh should withdraw his support to the Lahore Durbar and strike a separate deal with the British. To his credit, Gulab Singh refused to negotiate any personal deal with the British as he was acting as an envoy for Dalip Singh. Accordingly, the Treaty of Lahore was signed on 9 March, 1946 wherein it was agreed that the Sikhs cede the territory between the Beas and the Sutlej Rivers and pay Rs 15 lakh pounds as war indemnity.

At this stage another bit player briefly held center-stage and changed the course of history; Lal Singh, the Prime Minister of Lahore was among those who disliked Gulab Singh immensely and in order to kill various birds with one stone, suggested to the

British that in lieu of the war indemnity, all the hill territories of the Sikh kingdom including Jammu and Kashmir be given to them. From Lal Singh's point of view, this was a stroke of genius for he thought a) he had deprived Gulab Singh of his territory and b) in the long term, the British who were now in control of the entire Kashmir region including Gilgit and Hazara, wouldn't be able to hold Kashmir because their lines of communication would have to run through the Punjab.

This formal renegotiating of the Treaty of Lahore now backfired miserably for the Lahore Durbar. Gulab Singh, his own position threatened by this new development, was open to the original deal offered by the British. The latter, lacking the resources to occupy and administer such a vast state as Jammu and Kashmir, were only too happy to honour their original proposal with the added rider that Gulab Singh, as one of the former Chiefs of the Lahore Durbar, pay the war indemnity of Rupees 75 lakh. Accordingly, this agreement was formally finalized in the Treaty of Amritsar, which was signed and sealed on March 16, 1846. The British, who had never set foot in Kashmir, had sold off some serious real estate that together with what was already under Dogra control, now formed the Princely State of Jammu & Kashmir.

Sikh artillery in action during the Sikh War 1849. With Gulab Singh sitting out the conflict as a neutral, the British deploying every trick in the book finally overcame the Sikh Empire. (KaleidoIndia)

Shiv Kunal Verma is the author of the highly acclaimed ***1962: The War That Wasn't*** and ***The Long Road to Siachen: The Question Why***.

COMMENTS (190 Words)

HISTORY WITHOUT BLINKERS

The key to understanding the Kashmir problem is to look into the history of the region without being restricted by blinders. The first four parts of the series by Shiv Kunal Verma whose own 'boots on the ground' knowledge of this complex subject has indeed been fascinating and I look forward to the coming weeks with growing anticipation. Ever since the British chose to play the Hindu versus Muslim card, post-1947 the Kashmir Valley has been perceived to be a 'Muslim' issue which not only suited the newly-created Pakistan to lay claim, but also impacted the Indian mind-set when it came to dealing with the Valley. Today, across the entire spectrum, regardless of where we live on the subcontinent or which faith we follow, the festering issues have to be tackled by the younger generation and for a start, I feel it is vital a series such as this is read by our huge student body in particular. It is easy to take on an anti-establishment stand and shout slogans, but if meaningful change has to come, it has to be from within. — **Shazia Ilmi, New Delhi**