

UNIT 44 – UPSC - First Anglo-Sikh War

India's History : Modern India : First Anglo-Sikh war - 1845-1846

Anglo-Sikh War



ANGLO-SIKH WAR 1, 1845-46, resulting in partial subjugation of the Sikh kingdom, as the outcome of British expansionism. It was near-anarchical conditions that overtook the Lahore court after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in June 1839. The English, by then firmly installed in Ferozpur the Sikh frontier, about 70 km from Lahore, the Sikh capital, were watching the happenings across the border with more than neighbour's interest. The disorder that revealed there promised them a good opportunity for direct intervention.

Up to 1838, the British troops on the Sikh frontier had amounted to one regiment at Sabathu in the hills and two at Ludhiana with six pieces of artillery, equaling in all about 2,500 men. The total rose to 8,000 during the time of Lord Auckland (1836-42) who increased the number of troops at Ludhiana and created a new military post at Ferozpur, which was actually Past of Sikh kingdom's dominion south of the Sutlej. British preparations for a war with the Sikhs began seriously in 1843 when the new governor-general, Lord Ellenborough (1842-44), discussed with the Home government the possibilities of a military occupation of the Punjab. English and Indian infantry reinforcement began arriving at each of the frontier posts of Ferozpur and Ludhiana. Cavalry and artillery regiments moved up to Ambala and Kasauli. Works were in the process of erection around the magazine at Ferozpur, and the fort at Ludhiana began to be fortified. Plans for the construction of bridges over the rivers Markanda and Ghaggar were prepared, and a new road link to join Meerut and Ambala was taken in hand. Exclusive of the newly constructed cantonments of Kasauli and Shimla, Ellenborough had been able to collect a force of 11,639 men and 48 guns at Ambala, Ludhiana and Ferozpur. Everywhere," wrote Lord Ellenborough, we are trying to get

things in order and especially to strengthen and equip the artillery with which the fight will be."

Seventy boats of thirty-five tons each, with the necessary equipments to bridge the Sutlej at any point, were under construction; fifty-six pontoons were on their way from Bombay for use in Sindh, and two steamers were being constructed to ply on the River Sutlej. In November 1845," he informed the Duke of Wellington, "the army will be equal to any operation. I should be sorry to have it called to the field sooner." In July 1844, Lord Ellenborough was replaced by Lord Hardinge (1844-48), a Peninsula veteran, as governor-general of India. Hardinge further accelerated the process of strengthening the Sutlej frontier for a war with the Sikhs. The abrasive and belligerent Major George Broadfoot as the political agent on the Punjab frontier replaced the affable Colonel Richmond. Lord Cough, the commander-in-chief, established his headquarters at Ambala. In October 1844, the British military force on the frontier was 17,000 infantry and 60 guns. Another 10,000 troops were to be ready by the end of November. Ferozpur's garrison strength under the command of Sir John Littler was raised to 7,000; by January 1845, the total British force amounted to 20,000 men and 60 guns. We can collect," Hardinge reported to the Home government, 33,000 infantry, 6,000 cavalry and 100 guns in six weeks." In March additional British and Indian regiments were quietly moved to Ferozpur, Ludhiana and Ambala. Field batteries of 9 pounders with horses or bullocks to draw them, and 24 additional pieces of heavy ordnance were on their way to the frontier. In addition, 600 elephants to draw the battering train of 24-pounder batteries had reached Agra, and 7,000 camels between Kanpur and the Sutlej were to move up in the summer to Ferozpur, which was to be the concentration point for a forward offensive movement.



Lord Hardinge, blamed unnecessarily by the Home government for inadequate military preparations for the first Sikh war, had, during the seventeen months between Ellenborough's departure and the commencement of hostilities with the Sikhs, increased the garrison strength at Ferozpur from 4,596 men and 12 guns to 10,472 men and 24 guns; at Ambala from 4,113 men and 24 guns to 12,972 men and 32 guns; at Ludhiana from 3,030 men and 12 guns to 7,235 men and 12 guns, and at Meerut from 5,573 men and 18 guns to 9,844 men and 24 guns. The relevant strength of the advanced armies, including those at the hill stations of Sabathu and Kasauli, was raised from 24,000 men and 66 guns to 45,500 men and 98 guns. These figures are based on official British papers, particularly Hardinge's private correspondence on Punjab affairs with his predecessor, Lord Ellenborough. Thus Total number of British

troops around Punjab was 86,023 men and 116 guns. In addition to the concentration of troops on the border, an elaborate supply depot was set up by the British at Basslan, near Raikot, in Ludhiana district. The Lahore Darbar's vamps or representatives and news writers in the cis-Sutlej region sent alarming reports of these large-scale British military movements across the border. The Sikhs were deeply wrought upon by these war preparations, especially by Broad foot's acts of hostility. The rapid march in November 1845 of the governor-general towards the frontier and a report of Sir Charles Napier's speech in the Delhi Gazette saying that the British were going to war with the Sikhs filled Lahore with rumors of invasion. The Sikh ranks, alerted to the danger of a British offensive, started their own preparations. Yet the army pinches or regimental representatives, who had taken over the affairs of the Lahore forces into their own hands after the death of Wazir Jawahar Singh, were at this time maintaining, according to George Campbell, a British civilian employed in the cis-Sutlej territory, *Memoirs of My Indian Career*, "Wonderful order at Lahore.. and almost puritanical discipline in the military republic."

However, the emergence of the army Panchayats as a new centre of power greatly perturbed the British authority that termed it as "unholy alliance between the republican army and the Darbar." In this process Sikh army had indeed been transformed. It had now assumed the role of the Khalsa. It worked through elected regimental committees declaring that Guru Gobind Singh's ideal of the Sikh commonwealth had been revived, with the Sarbatt Khalsa or the Sikh as a whole assuming all executive, military and civil authority in the State. The British decried this as "the dangerous military democracy of the panchayat system," in which soldiers were in a state of success mutiny. "When the British agent made a reference the Lahore Darbar about military preparations in the Punjab, it replied that there only defensive measures to counter the signs of the British. The Darbar, on other hand, asked for the return of the estimated at over seventeen lakh of the Lahore grandee Suchet Singh had left buried in Ferozpur, the restoration of the village of Mauran granted by Maharaja Ranjit Singh to one of his generals Hukam Singh Malvai, but subsequently resumed by the ruler of Nabha with the active connivance of the British, and free passage of Punjabi armed constabulary a right that had been acknowledged by the British on paper but more often than not in practice. The British government rejected the Darbar's claims and severed diplomatic relations with it. The armies under Hugh Gough and Lord Hardinge began proceeding towards Ferozpur. To forestall their joining those at Ferozpur, the Sikh army began to cross the Sutlej on 11 December near Harike Pattan into its own territory on the other side of the river. The crossing over the Sutlej by Sikhs was made a pretext by the British for opening hostilities and on 13 December Governor-General Lord Hardinge issued a proclamation announcing war on the Sikhs. The declaration charged the State of Lahore with violation of the treaty of friendship of 1809 and justified British preparations as merely precautionary measures for the protection of the Sutlej frontier. The British simultaneously declared Sikh possessions on the left bank of the Sutlej forfeit.

Hesitation and indecision marred Sikh military operations. Having crossed the Sutlej with five divisions, each 8,000 - 12,000 strong, an obvious strategy for them would have been to move forward. They did in a bold sweeping movement first encircle

Ferozpur, then held by Sir John Littler with only 7,000 men, but withdrew without driving the advantage home and dispersed their armies in a wide semicircle from Harike to Mudki and thence to Ferozeshah, 16 km southeast of Ferozpur. The abandonment of Ferozpur as a first target was the result of the treachery of the Sikh Prime Minister, Lal Singh, who was in treasonable communication with Captain Peter Nicholson, the assistant political agent of the British. He asked the latter's advice and was told not to attack Ferozpur. This instruction he followed seducing the Sikhs with an ingenious excuse that, instead of falling upon an easy prey, the Khalsa should exalt their fame by captivity or the death of the Lat Sahib (the governor general) himself. A division precipitately moved towards Ludhiana also remained inactive long enough to lose the benefit of the initiative. The Khalsa army had crossed the Sutlej borne on a wave of popular enthusiasm, it was equally matched (60,000 Sikh soldiers vs. 86,000 British soldiers) if not superior to the British force. Its soldiers had the will and determination to fight or die, but not its commanders. There was no unique among them, and each of them seemed to act as he thought best. Drift was the policy deliberately adopted by them. On 18 December, the Sikhs came in touch with British army, which arrived under Sir Hugh Gough, the commander-in-chief, from Ludhiana. A battle took place at Mudki, 32 km from Ferozpur. Lal Singh, who headed the Sikh attack, deserted his army and fled the field when the Sikhs stood firm in their order, fighting in a resolute and determined manner. The leaderless Sikhs fought a grim hand-to-hand battle against the more numerous enemy led by the most experienced commanders in the world. The battle continued with unabated fury till midnight (and came thereafter to be known as "Midnight Mudki"). The Sikhs retired with a loss of 17 guns while the British suffered heavy casualties amounting to 872 killed and wounded, including Quartermaster-General Sir Robert Sale, Sir John McCaskill and Brigadier Boulton. Reinforcements were sent for from Ambala, Meerut and Delhi. Lord Hardinge, unmindful of his superior position of governor-general, offered to become second-in-command to his commander-in-chief.

The second action was fought three days later, on 21 December at Ferozeshah, 16 km both from Mudki and Ferozpur. The governor-general and the commander-in-chief, assisted by reinforcements led by General Littler from Ferozpur, made an attack upon the Sikhs who were awaiting them behind strong entrenchments. The British ♦ 16,700 men and 69 guns ♦ tried to overrun the Sikhs in one massive cavalry, infantry and artillery onslaught, but the assault was stubbornly resisted. Sikhs' batteries fired with rapidity and precision. There was confusion in the ranks of the English and their position became increasingly critical. The growing darkness of the frosty winter night reduced them to sore straits. The battle of Ferozeshah is regarded as one of the most fiercely contested battles fought by the British in India. During that "night of horrors," the commander-in-chief acknowledged, "We were in a critical and perilous state." Counsels of retreat and surrender were raised and despair struck the British camp. In the words of General Sir Isaac Grant, Sir Henry Hardinge thought it was all up and gave his sword ♦ a present from the Duke of Wellington and which once belonged to Napoleon ♦ and his Star of the Empire to his son, with directions to proceed to Ferozpur, remarking that "if the day were lost, he must fall. "

Lal Singh and Tej Singh again came to the rescue of the English. The former suddenly deserted the Khalsa army during the night and the latter the next morning (22

December), which enabled the British to turn defeat into victory. The British loss was again heavy, 1,560 killed and 1,721 wounded. The number of casualties among officers was comparatively higher. The Sikhs lost about 2,000 men and 73 pieces of artillery.

A temporary cessation of hostilities followed the battle of Ferozeshah. The English were not in a position to assume the offensive and waited for heavy guns and reinforcements to arrive from Delhi. Lal Singh and Tej Singh allowed them the much-needed respite in as much as they kept the Sikhs from recrossing the Sutlej. To induce desertions, Lord Hardinge issued a proclamation on the Christmas day inviting all natives of Hindustan to quit the service of the Sikh State on pain of forfeiting their property and to claim protection from the British government. The deserters were also offered liberal rewards and pensions.

A Sikh sardar, Ranjodh Singh Majithia, crossed the Sutlej in force and was joined by Ajit Singh, of Ladva, from the other side of the river. They marched towards Ludhiana and burnt a portion of the cantonment. Sir Harry Smith (afterwards Governor of Cape Colony), who was sent to relieve Ludhiana, marched eastwards from Ferozpur, keeping a few miles away from the Sutlej. Ranjodh Singh Majithia harried Smith's column and, when Smith tried to make a detour at Baddoval, attacked his rear with great vigor and captured his baggage train and stores (21 January). But Harry Smith retrieved his position a week later by inflicting a defeat on Ranjodh Singh Majithia and Ajit Singh, of Ladva, (28 January).

The last battle of the campaign took place on 10 February. To check the enemy advance on Lahore, a large portion of the Sikh army was entrenched in a horseshoe curve on the Sutlej near the village of Sabhraon, under the command of Tej Singh while the cavalry battalions and the dreaded ghorcharas under Lal Singh were a little higher up the river. Entrenchments at Sabhraon were on the left bank of the Sutlej with a pontoon bridge connecting them with their base camp. Their big guns were placed behind high embankments and consequently immobilized for offensive action. The infantry was also posted behind earthworks and could not, therefore, be deployed to harass the opponents.

Early in February, the British received ample stores of ammunition from Delhi. Lal Singh had already passed on to the English officers the required clues for an effective assault. Gough and Hardinge now decided to make a frontal attack on Sabhraon and destroy the Darbar army at one blow. A heavy mist hung over the battlefield, enveloping both contending armies. As the sun broke through the mist, the Sikhs found themselves encircled between two horseshoes: facing them were the British and behind them was the Sutlej, now in spate. After a preliminary artillery duel, British cavalry made a feint to check on the exact location of the Sikh guns. The cannonade was resumed, and in two hours British guns put the Darbar artillery out of action. Then the British charged Sikh entrenchments from three sides. Tej Singh fled across the pontoon bridge as soon as the contest started and had it destroyed making reinforcement or return of Sikh soldiers impossible. Gulab Singh Dogra stopped sending supplies and rations from Lahore. Lal Singh's ghorcharas did not put in their appearance at Sabhraon. In the midst of these treacheries, a Sikh warrior, Sham

Singh Attarivala, symbolizing the unflinching will of the Khalsa, vowed to fight unto the last and fall in battle rather than retire in defeat. He rallied the ranks depleted by desertions. His courage inspired the Sikhs to make a determined bid to save the day, but the odds were against them. Sham Singh fell fighting in the foremost ranks along with his dauntless comrades. The British casualties at Sabhraon were 2,403 killed; the Sikhs lost 3,125 men in the action and all their guns were either captured or abandoned in the river. Captain J.D. Cunningham, who was present as an additional aide-de-camp to the governor-general, describes the last scene of the battle vividly in his *A History of the Sikhs*: "...although assailed on either side by squadrons of horse and battalions of foot, no Sikh offered to submit, and no disciple of Guru Gobind Singh asked for quarter. They everywhere showed a front to the victors, and stalked slowly and sullenly away, while many rushed singly forth to meet assured death by contending with a multitude. The victors looked with stolid wonderment upon the indomitable courage of the vanquished.... "

Lord Hugh Gough, the British commander-in-chief, under whose leadership the two Anglo-Sikh wars were fought, described Sabhraon as the Waterloo of India. Paying tribute to the gallantry of the Sikhs, he said: "Policy precluded me publicly recording my sentiments on the splendid gallantry of our fallen foe, or to record the acts of heroism displayed, not only individually, but almost collectively, by the Sikh sardars and the army; and I declare were it not from a deep conviction that my country's good required the sacrifice, I could have wept to have witnessed the fearful slaughter of so devoted a body of men."

Lord Hardinge, who saw the action, wrote: " Few escaped; none, it may be said, surrendered. The Sikhs met their fate with the resignation, which distinguishes their race.

Two days after their victory at Sabhraon, British forces crossed the Sutlej and occupied Kasur. The Lahore Darbar empowered Gulab Singh Dogra, who had earlier come down to Lahore with regiments of hillmen, to negotiate a treaty of peace. The wily Gulab Singh first obtained assurances from the army Parishes that they would agree to the terms he made and then tendered the submission of the darbar to Lord Hardinge. The governor-general, realizing that the Sikhs were far from vanquished, forbore from immediate occupation of the country. By the terms imposed by the victorious British through the peace treaty of 9 March, the Lahore Darbar was compelled to give up Jalandhar Doab, pay a war indemnity amounting to a million and a half sterling, reduce its army to 20,000 infantry and 12,000 cavalry, hand over all the guns used in the war and relinquish control of both banks of the Sutlej to the British. A further condition was added two days later on 11 March: the posting of a British unit in Lahore till the end of the year on payment of expenses. The Darbar was unable to pay the full war indemnity and ceded in lieu thereof the hill territories between the Beas and the Indus. Kashmir was sold to Gulab Singh Dogra for 75 lakh rupees. A week later, on 16 March, another treaty was signed at Amritsar recognizing him as Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, affirming the suspicion that Gulab Singh Dogra indeed was involved in sedition against Khalsa Sarkar. Although Maharani Jind Kaur continued to act as the regent and Raja Lal Singh as water of the minor

Maharaja Duleep Singh, effective power had passed into the hands of the British resident, Colonel Henry Lawrence. And thus end the First Anglo-Sikh war..

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