Will the Sikhs take Jalalabad?
A Footnote to the First Anglo-Afghan War
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At the beginning of 1842, during the tormented aftermath of disaster in Afghanistan, with their envoy assassinated, their army virtually annihilated, the British Government in India wrestled with many alternatives in their search to reestablish honour and reputation. One proposal suggested the British give Jalalabad and the Ningrahar Valley to the Sikh Durbar, in return for Sikh assistance in the relief of British troops besieged at Jalalabad.

The British went to Afghanistan to raise a bulwark against suspected Czarist designs on India. Specifically, the presence of Russians in the Persian camp besieging Herat and the Afghan Amir’s supposed negotiations with both Persian and Russian agents in Afghanistan were viewed as threats to the sub-continent’s safety. For this venture, the British entered into the Tripartite Treaty (1838) with the Sikh Maharajah of the Punjab, Ranjit Singh, and the exiled Afghan king, Shah Shuja, during the negotiating of which the Maharajah requested Jalalabad and its surrounding areas in exchange for collaborating claims to Skikarpo. He lacs (1 lac = 100,000) rupees in lieu of Jalalabad and the Sikh State contracted to station 5000 Muslim troops at Peshawar to come to the aid of the Afghan king should it become necessary (Article 15). (122/24, 6 June 38 to be read: letter no. 24 in Book 122 dated 6 June 1838, in the Punjab Records Office, Lahore, Pakistan.) Maharajah Ranjit Singh died as Shah Shuja and his escort of British and Indian troops approached Kabul in June 1839 and the vaunted stability of the Sikh State was rapidly replaced by chaos. The bulwark began to crumble. Locally, tribal and family rivalries plagued the peace in Afghanistan and palace revolts kept the Punjab in turmoil. Two major factions existed in the Sikh Durbar at Lahore: the effete Sikh Maharajah Sher Singh versus the two Hindu Rajahs from Jammu, Wazir Dhan Singh and his brother Rajah Gulab Singh whose independent power was such that he sent an army to Ladakh in June 1841 to demand tribute of the Chinese government in Tibet. The British Indian Government demanded that this army withdraw, but the Sikhs marched Gartok, and at times dared to enter British protected territory to levy dues. These regional confrontations exacerbated the instability caused by local political intrigue. Although the Persian siege of Herat had ended, as the Sikhs and British invaded Afghanistan and the Sikhs struck at the Chinese, the lands beyond Britain’s western frontier on the Sutlej River seethed and the peoples along their northern frontier stirred restlessly. Most disturbingly, the lucrative trade in cashmir shawl-wool was almost at a complete standstill. Further, the repercussions of these regional confrontations spread to the global sphere and affected Britain’s relations with Europe, Persia and Russia, and jeopardized a speedy conclusion of Britain’s own war with China (Opium War, 1838–42) where trade was also at a standstill awaiting a military solution. The local problems of the Afghan campaign ceased to be local. A solution to the problem was, however, sought locally, and Peshawar became the center of attention as dire rumblings emanated from the Afghan hills. In October 1841 Ghilzai tribesmen closed the passes east of Kabul and badly cut up General Sale’s force as it moved to Jalalabad, on the 2nd of November an angry Kabul mob killed Sir Alexander Burnes, the British envoy was murdered on the 23rd of December, and the Kabul garrison was slaughtered between 6-12 January as it marched to Jalalabad, where the besieged garrison looked to Peshawar
Critics of British policy hinted at the time that the British Government in India in reality intended to abandon those stranded in Afghanistan, and simply appointed generals and moved troops as a façade for their spineless policies, but the officers in Peshawar and the Punjab were determined to facilitate the gathering of reliable troops for an advance on Jalalabad. Government, however, feared to weaken their defences of India by sending more British troops from the provinces to Peshawar. Their forces were already thinned by the simultaneous expeditions to Afghanistan and China. Sikh participation was, therefore, considered to be essential and citing Article 15 of the Tripartite Treaty, the British Political Agent in Peshawar, Captain Frederick Mackeson, asked that the 5000 Sikh troops stationed at Peshawar be sent to the immediate relief of Jalalabad (40/164, 2 Dec. 41).

The Sikhs refused. The Durbar’s Sikh army, in general mutiny since early 1841, was little more than a mob clamouring for pay which was months in arrears because factional dissensions at the court prevented taxes and tribute from being collected, reducing the revenue system to tatters. Scarcely heeding their own officers, this army was little inclined to go forth to fight the battle of foreigners whom they distrusted and held in growing contempt as the mighty image of British invincibility gathered tarnish. Only Rajah Gobal Singh retained some semblance of control and in the beginning of 1842 his thoughts were turned toward Tibet where his army had been totally destroyed by the Chinese. Occasional spurts of cooperation occurred. At the end of January 1842, Gobal Singh camped with 10,000 men at Attock on the left bank of the Indus River, facing 4000 mutinous Sikh troops on the right bank who had refused to enter the Khyber Pass in support of two British Indian regiments a week earlier. The two regiments had been disastrously defeated, the Khyber, life-line to the besieged garrison at Jalalabad, was now in enemy hands, and morale was at an all time low. It was imperative that Rajah Gobal Singh move to Peshawar. But how to induce him when he was more inclined to move to Ladakh to pursue a venture much dearer to his heart than the vindication of British honour in Afghanistan?

Captain Henry Lawrence, Assistant Political Agent at Peshawar, travelled to Attock and after a three hour meeting with the Rajah wrote to Mr. Clerk, Agent to the Governor-General North-West Frontier, on duty at the Sikh Durbar in Lahore:

"It has struck me that if we made it worth while to Rajah Gobal Singh he could and would efficiently assist us; why not give him the Ningrathin Valley and let us have a Hindu monarchy between the Sikh one and Cabul;... Peshawar, Jalalabad and his present hill possessions would make a neat municipality and for a time could bind him to us... I'm the more inclined to this opinion from seeing that the two brother Rajahs alone can..."
now help us, and that they are not likely to do so unless we pay them for so doing."
(1882/3, 29 Jan. 42)

The very next day in Peshawar, Mackeson wrote to Major-General Pollock who was just approaching Attock on his way to take command of the army of retribution at Peshawar:

"There seems to me to be nothing for us but to rely large hopes on the Sikh Court, in the shape of partition of Territory to induce them to join us in our bold and avowed purpose extermination on these Afghans. Jalalabad might be offered to them at a share of its revenues, but the army also of the Sikhs must be largely bribed if I fear it may be found wanting even if the Mahutga is disposed to assist us. We require numbers now and the Sikh Army is large enough for anything. Let them pour into Peshawar and into Ningahr and pillage and slaughter in any till the Afghans cry, hold enough."
(HA56, 30 Jan. 42)

Mr. Clerk was less than enthusiastic and forwarded the proposals to the Governor-General with these comments:

"In regard to the means of inducing zealous cooperation on the part of the Sikh troops, I do not think that the expectations of Captains Mackeson and Lawrence are quite reasonable, or the almost indefinite extent of proposed reward justified, or the direct negotiation with the Jumma Rajahs for their immediate assistance honourable..."
(Clerk to Addinck, 13 Feb., 42, quoted in Kaye, Vol. III)

The few sources which relate to the "Jalalabad bribe," credit Mackeson and Lawrence with initiating the proposal, and then drop the discussion. The documents quoted below, however, show that it was actually pursued most aggressively by those who first dismissed it.

It took the patient and meticulous Pollock two months to restore morale and reestablish discipline in Peshawar before moving his force of 18,000 men forward on the 6th of April 1842. Rajah Gulab Singh advanced in concert with Pollock, with four Muslim battalions, 700 Muslim horse and two regiments of Sikh Cavalry, about 4000 men. A supporting force of 10,000 Sikhs remained in the Khyber Pass until Pollock forced the pass and then returned to Peshawar on April 8th. The Sikhs agreed to help man posts in the pass and had assisted in forcing the Khyber without receiving any promises of compensation. This encouraged Clerk, without further prompting from Mackeson or Lawrence, to write to the Governor-General suggesting some compensation for their cooperation:

"A bad reputation, a powerful neighbor's audacity and latterly hard knocks in many skills are all the rewards which the apprehension of a common Sikh and his countrymen have gained by their intimate friendship with the British Government..." While the British Government continues a military connection with Afghanistan to keep open the Khyber, it is almost imperative. After that connection may have ceased, the security of the tribes in its vicinity, will be satisfactory as a great benefit to the trade of India and to peace... The Sikhs have a minister (Wazir Dhan Singh NO) who would be glad to undertake its security of the pass NO if the British Government objects not to his subjection of the Hill Tribes... and to the retention of a post in advance at that of Jalalabad..."
(1536, 14 Apr. 42)

In support of this proposal Clerk suggested that he believed the people of the Khyber and Ningihar would find any change from "Afghan bigotry and misgovernment" desirable, that Rajah Gulab Singh's vaunted severity would be a fitting punishment for Afghan lawlessness, and that this would secure India from invasion by the Afghans. Lord Ellenborough's first reply was cautious:

"The Governor-General has attentively considered the suggestion contained in Your letter of the 14th Instant relative to the giving over to the Sikhs of the Fort of Jalalabad. His Lordship entertain great doubt whether the be induced to accept the custody of the place - to occupy it would apparently place them in a false position -... nevertheless if it should be agreeable to the Sikhs to receive that place into their hands the Governor-General sees no objection to your opening a communication with them upon the subject..."
(130/40, 24 Apr. 42)

Four days later, however, His Lordship sent more positive instructions, marked for the Secret Department:

"Sir, ... The Passion which appears to be entertained by the Jumma Rajahs for making conquests in Chinese Thibet may lead to consequences affecting not themselves alone, but the British Government in India..."

3. Already the demand of a large body of Troops for operations in Chinese Thibet is tending to make a very material change in the direction of the Sikh Forces on the side of the Khyber and further complicates the already sufficiently complicated question of policy with respect to Afghanistan.

7. The strong objections which appear to exist to the acquisition by the Jumma Rajahs or by the Sikh Government of any Territory in Chinese Thibet, and even to any attempt on their part to make any such acquisition, do not seem to apply to the acquisition by them or by the Sikh Government of territory lying between the right bank of the Indus, the Suffed Koh Range and the Himalayas.

9. ... If the Sikh Government or the Jumma Rajahs with its permission should be desirous of adding to their domain such territories on the right bank of the Indus, foregiving the erroneous ambition of possessing territories beyond the Himalayas, the British Government would not object to the carrying of that object out of itself, and would furnish its accomplishment by placing the Fort of Jalalabad in their hands."
(130/41, 27 Apr. 42)

Jalalabad was thus officially preferred to the Sikhs by the Governor-General of India in return for peace on the eastern front and a commitment that the Sikhs would relinquish all interest in that quarter. General-Pollock was accordingly ordered to deliver up Jalalabad to the Sikhs on instructions from Mr. Clerk (130/180, 6 May).

The General had no objections and only pointed out that the matter would require considerable preparation, the details of which Lawrence spelled out at great length during the next five months of stultifying inaction. To take possession, Lawrence estimated the Durbar should be prepared to provide at least 26,000 troops for service in the Afghan area and
Khyber Pass, they should dig from 20–30 wells along the march route, and provide large numbers of guns, carriage and supplies (41B/151, 20 June).

Mr. Clerk reported to the Governor-General, however, that:

"Sir, ... the Lahore Government evinced considerable desire to receive possession from the British Government of either Jalalabad or Cabool, or both,

2. But before definitively engaging to hold in security or to hold at all a fort so distant as Jalalabad is from the present Sikh frontier, the Durbar seems to be anxious to ascertain the views of the British Government for the final adjustment of the eastern Afghan question."

(153/114, 18 May 42)

The Sikhs were not the only ones craving for details on "the final adjustment of the entire Afghan question." While publicly announcing that a "signal and decisive blow" must be made to restore the British image, Lord Ellenborough had secretly ordered General Pollock to withdraw from Jalalabad immediately, and General Nott to quit Kandahar. The Generals procrastinated claiming that honour could not be restored nor the prisoners released until Kabul had been chastised. With characteristic temper Lawrence wrote to Clerk saying: "The Government are tearing out our vitals, it is indeed difficult to know how to act, for what to prepare" (41B/115, 10 May 42).

A Sikh contingent of about 4,625 cavalry and infantry moved to Jalalabad in June (41/74, 4 June 42), having been ordered by their Amir to go to Kabul should the hope for much materialize. No preparations for a permanent takeover were, however, evident (41A/110, 4 July 42, 41A/115, 11 July 42). Sikh reluctance was exacerbated by the total lack of candid policy statements from the Governor-General. Surely, they surmised, some sort of devious trickery was being plotted.

If, the Sikhs reasoned, they could not hold Jalalabad and lose it to the Afghans, the British might "take Lahore or Multan or Kashmir in lieu of Jalalabad, saying I gave the latter in trust to you, and you by want of carriage, have lost it: I will take the former in its place" (Peshawar Newsletter of 21 July, in 41/85). The Durbar's worries about the Afghans on their western frontier, reported Clerk, "are as nothing compared with its dread of the usurpations on its independence particularly since they so distrusted the British on their eastern frontier.

Finally, and most importantly perhaps, court factions within the Durbar precluded effective policy making and rendered it impossible to carry out the considerable organization of men and materials outlined by Lawrence. The Hindu Wazir Dhan Singh from Jammu and his brother general, Gulab Singh, would gladly have pursued the annexation aggressively for the Durbar, but the Sikh Maharajah told Clerk he was apprehensive for the Durbar, but the Sikh Maharajah told Clerk he was apprehensive that the Rajahs "might only retain the acquisition too firmly" (154/47, 2 Sept. 42), thereby depriving the Sikh State of all benefits while increasing Jammu power in the Durbar disastrously. For their own part, the Jammu Rajahs viewed the acquisition of turbulent territory in the west with less enthusiasm after news came in September that their newly raised army had gained a victory over the Chinese in Tibet where the two armies were negotiating an advantageous peace treaty in the vicinity of Tashigong (41A/147, 18 Sept. 42).

The Durbar, therefore, declined to commit themselves but the Governor-General pursued the proposal to the very last: on the 18th of October, after General Pollock had won his way and chastised Kabul, Lord Ellenborough wrote a letter in his own hand to Pollock saying:

"... I have informed the Faqeer (Sikh Foreign Minister-ND) that upon retirement of the British Army Jalalabad shall be given up to the Sikh Troops ... and you will accordingly so
Fig. 7: Bengal Troops on the Line of March by an Officer in that Army, detail of officers Baggage Carriage from a Panorama Scroll 28 feet long.

Fig. 8: "A Sortie from Jellalabad, 1 April 1842", by D. Curliffe, 1879.

Fig. 9: Amir Dost Muhammad of Afghanistan, exiled in 1839 and returned to the throne of Kabul in 1843, by a Punjabi artist.

Fig. 10: Rajah Gulab Singh, Commander of the Sikh Troops in Afghanistan in 1842, by a Punjabi artist.

Fig. 11: Maharajah Sher Singh, Ruler of the Sikh Nation from 1841 to his assassination in Lahore in 1843, by a Punjabi artist.
occupation shall be no longer necessary to you. . . . You will not act upon the instructions given in this letter unless you should receive from the Maharajah Sher Singh a letter, . . . informing you who on His Highness' part is authorized to receive Jalalabad from you.

Jalalabad in the state we held it — They had not 5,000 men with me and I don't think they would have been safe in the Valley with less than 20,000. It was my business to get back without delay and as there was no prospect of any Sikh force arriving from Peshawar I left the fortifications of Jalalabad a heap of ruins;" (41C/218, 5 Novr. 42, to the Governor-General)


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