

meantime, a desperate appeal for help was sent to Peshāvar through a Sikh woman disguised as a Paṭhān.

Harī Singh Nalvā rose from his sick bed and made his way to Jamraud. The Afgāns were frightened to see the terrible Nalvā's approach. They raised the siege of Jamraud and took up position in the valley of Khaibar. Harī Singh Nalvā drew up his forces in battle formation and waited for seven days for the Afgāns to attack. When Nalvā realized that the Afgāns were afraid to fight, he ordered the Pañjābīs to advance. The engagement took place on April 30, 1837. The Pañjābīs drove the Afgāns before them as the wind drives leaves. Dost Muhammad's son, Muhammad Akbar Khān (ਮੁਹੰਮਦ ਅਕਬਰ ਖਾਨ), who was watching the Afgān catastrophe saw that Nalvā had gone well ahead of his army. Akbar Khān swooped on the advance column. Nalvā was fatally wounded in this commotion, but his death was kept a secret until the enemy had been defeated, and driven beyond the mouth of Khaibar.

Harī Singh Nalvā lived and died for the glory of the Khālsā empire. He fought many battles and rose to the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Khālsā forces. He was allowed to strike a coin in his name at Kashmīr (ਕਸ਼ਮੀਰ) and at Peshāvar. He served as the Governor of Kashmīr and Hazārā, and was the Governor of Peshāvar until the end of his life.

Adapted from: The Gurū's Word & Illustrated Sikh History

Strategy and War Tactics of the Sikhs (ਸਿਖ)

The Sikh guerilla leaders have left behind no account of their designs and deliberations. The contemporary historians, who cared to take notice of their military activities, have merely described what they heard and saw and not what the Sikhs had thought and planned. Consequently, there is little direct evidence available with respect to the strategy of the Sikhs and their battle plans, although there is enough evidence available from which these can be inferred. The strategy of the Sikhs becomes sufficiently obvious if we closely follow the course of their battles and correlate their tactics with their objectives. While formulating their strategy they seem to have taken into account the obvious factors, such as, their own objectives and those of their enemies, as also the character and composition of the enemy forces and the real source of his strength.

Strategy against the Mughals

The Mughals were imperialist-expansionist type of invaders. The real strength of the Mughal empire lay not in its army but in the vast resources of Hindostān. The Sikhs seem to have realized this. They, accordingly, devised such a strategy that focused on denying them these resources. To begin with, the Sikhs persuaded the peasants to withhold payment of land revenue to the Mughals. Where persuasion failed, as it failed more often than it succeeded in initial stages, they resorted to calculated terrorism in the countryside. They raided the villages and plundered the landlords, the moneylenders, the revenue officers and the hostile peasantry. Consequently the land revenue collection went down. Ratan Singh Bhaṅgū (ਰਤਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਭੰਗੂ), whose Panth Prakāśh (ਪੰਥ ਪ੍ਰਕਾਸ਼) is based on contemporary oral evidence, has thus summed up the military implications of this economic warfare of the Sikhs: “Land revenue, the Mughals could collect none as the peasants refused to pay any on the grounds that they had already been robbed of their produce by the Sikhs. The Mughals, as they could not collect enough taxes, had little money to pay to their soldiers who consequently deserted them. And tell me if anyone can collect revenue from the peasants without being able to enforce recovery?” None could, at least not in those days.

The Sikhs also infested the trade-routes and plundered the merchants on the move. They frequently raided the Sarāms (ਸਰਾਂ) or the inns and the ferry sites. Within a few years they were, thus, able to close the highways to trade and traffic. Merchants avoided the Pañjāb (ਪੰਜਾਬ) plains and preferred to take their goods through the hill states of Jammū (ਜੰਮੂ) and Kāṅgrā (ਕਾਂਗੜਾ). This resulted in sizeable loss of income to the state from customs and transit duties. The third target of the Sikhs were the escorts carrying state revenues from the *Parganāhs* (ਪਰਗਨਾਹ) (the revenue estates) to the districts and hence to Lāhaur (ਲਾਹੌਰ) and Dillī (ਦਿੱਲੀ). They ambushed the escorts, raided their camping sites and plundered them in everyway. Thus, they strove to block the flow of wealth to the capital, a center where it generated power. This economic warfare waged by the Sikhs had far-reaching political and military implications. The Mughal economic system, primitive as it was, was not capable of bearing the burden of a disruptionist war of slow destruction. Consequently, it broke down under strain, and with it collapsed the *Mansabdārī* (ਮਨਸਬਦਾਰੀ) and *Jagīrdārī* (ਜਗੀਰਦਾਰੀ) systems, which were the backbone of the Mughal military system. These barons, the *Mansabdārs* and the *Jagīrdārs*, when they failed to collect the revenues assigned to them, also failed to raise and furnish stipulated contingents for the royal army.

The Sikhs further combined their economic strategy with the political and evolved a system of taking control of the population through the Rākhī (ਰਾਖੀ) system. Those were the days when confusion and anarchy reigned in Pañjāb. There was virtually no government and the law of the jungle prevailed. People had become an easy prey to anyone who chose to oppress them. The common man lived in constant dread of the invading hordes of the Afgān robber-soldiers, the professional robbers, the Sikhs, and the worse-than-robber revenue collectors. “Revenue administration there was none; the

cultivator followed the plough with a sword in his hand, the Collector came at the head of a regiment, and if he fared well, another soon followed him to pick up the crumbs.” “Society lived in a sort of trustless truce broken from time to time by treacherous murders and thievish forays.” In such times the Sikhs offered to protect the people on payment of a nominal ‘protection fee’, the Rākhī. In return they were not only to refrain themselves; they were also to restrain others and to protect the people from all types of raiders. In the areas thus brought under the Rākhī system raids were prevented, disputes settled and justice (rough and ready) meted out. In this way the Sikhs took over all the police functions of the state, which were the only functions of the state in those days. Thus, the people got relief and respite and the Sikhs got an opportunity to prove that they meant to rule. Politically, the Rākhī system made them saviors of the people; economically it assured them of regular legal income; and militarily, it put their organization on sound footing. In terms of guerilla strategy, it meant an onslaught on the stable image of the Mughal Empire and the staying power of the Afgān occupation forces.

In terms of pure military strategy, the Sikhs made the mercenary spirit of the Mughal soldiers, their principal target. The so-called Mughal army of the Pañjāb Governors of those days was mainly composed of the Iranian, Turk and other Central Asian mercenaries. Individually though, these soldiers were brave and reckless, their weakness lay in their mercenary spirit and their lack of loyalty to their Prince and the country of their employer. They had no direct stake in the outcome of the battle and consequently had little interest in serious fighting.

They frequently changed sides and often made off on the slightest pretext of reverse. Even in the midst of an offensive they were actually on the defensive because they were always keen to save their horses, the loss of which ruined them irretrievably: If they lost their animal they also lost the trooper’s extra allowance. The Sikhs were different. Soldiering was not their livelihood; it was a political necessity and a religious duty for them. The Sikhs believed in a war of mutual extermination; for them capitulation was ruled out. They were, thus, able to turn the contest of arms into a clash of wills, and such was their success that “fifty of them were enough to keep at bay a whole battalion of the King’s forces”.

Strategy against Ahmad Shāh Abdālī (ਅਹਮਦ ਸ਼ਾਹ ਅਬਦਾਲੀ)

Ahmad Shāh Abdālī, except that he wanted to annex the Pañjāb to his Afgān Empire, had little political ambitions in India. After his fourth invasion (1756-1757), when the Mughal Empire lay prostrate at his feet, he made no effort to capture it even though Shatbā (ਸ਼ਤਬਾ) (the prayer for the new King) was read in his name. He merely plundered in and around Dillī (ਦਿੱਲੀ) and while returning, he restored the throne to the vanquished Mughal Emperor, Ahmad Shāh. Even in the Pañjāb he tried to establish his direct rule only once (May 1757-April 1758), and frequently plundered it, although it was his province ever since 1752. To Ahmad Shāh war did not mean an extension of politics; it meant, at best, a means of extortion through politics. And, to his Baluch-Afgān group, it simply meant an organized plunder, a trade by arms. The main objective of the repeated invasions of Ahmad Shāh Abdālī was to plunder the wealth of India and to carry it to Afghanistan. It was so apparent from his conduct that every Pañjābī understood it, as is clear from their common saying: ‘Those born in Kābul are our regular guests.’

The Sikhs, although they were not the first people to understand the true object of the repeated invasions of Ahmad Shāh were certainly the only ones who decided to frustrate it. Their technique was simple: they robbed the robber. Initially, they concentrated on plundering raids involving little fighting, and subsequently, they combined serious fighting with plundering. They hung loosely around the Afgān army making use of every opportunity of plunder that fell in their way. Whenever it suited them to take the part of assailants, they fell upon the Afgān baggage train and on their convoys,