

Sikh-Durrani Entanglement for the Possession of Peshawar (1818-1823)

Razia Sultana^{*}

Introduction

Excessive use of coercion and persecution generally practiced by despotic rulers, force people to rebel. The Sikhs were a peaceful religious community, but cold blooded murder of their religious leaders and the general plight of the community made them militants. The failure on the part of later Mughal rulers to pacify their hard feelings compelled the Sikhs to defy.

On the other hand, a combination of circumstances led to the decline of the Mughals. Their weakening created a power vacuum which some local forces, for instance, Marhatas, Sikhs and even Jats struggled hard to fill. The ambition of Marhatas to rule Hindustan was shattered by Ahmed Shah Durrani in the third battle of Panipat, fought in 1761. They failed to recover from that humiliation. The Jats were numerically insignificant and could not make any difference without joining another major force. However, Sikhs, being a formidable power in Punjab, left lasting imprints on the contemporary and forthcoming history of the region.

The Sikhs ascendancy in Punjab could well be connected with the shrewd leadership of Ranjit Singh. Prior to that, they had been striving hard to be recognized as a separate entity, and heavily relied on militancy. They succeeded in harassing the Mughals on one side and the Afghans on the other. However, they lacked having a leader under whose banner they could forge a common cause against an enemy and acquire political power. In Ranjit Singh, they found the leader they required at that moment.

Through belligerence and guerrilla warfare persistent occupation of territories, that could materialize the aim to establish a government on a permanent basis on a particular piece of land, is not possible. It needs foresighted leadership, well-planned policy and some regular resources

^{*} Dr. Razia Sulatan is Associate Professor in the Department of History, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

to keep the ball rolling. The Sikh leaders before Ranjit Singh were petty war lords who would keep in check the encroachment of rival armies and similarly, would take delight in plundering incursions. Ranjit Singh had the ability to unite scattered Sikh factions to establish a state of the Sikhs by the Sikhs and for the Sikhs. The occurrence of succeeding events approved the capability of the Sikh leader, Ranjit Singh, for materializing the prime ambition of the Sikh community.

Moreover, the rise of Sikhs as a political power could not be understood unless viewed in the backdrop of Ahmed Shah Durrani's last three expeditions during 1764-69 for the elimination of Sikhs in Punjab. Although in those battles the Durrani forces were successful but in the guerrilla warfare they were no match for the Sikhs. In fact, Ahmed Shah failed to vanish them completely.¹

After the death of Ahmed Shah in 1773, his successors, except Shah Zaman, were indolent and involved in pleasure-seeking activities, consequently, their grasp over Punjab relaxed, and the Sikh confederation became united and more vigorous. Moreover, the Durrani rulers' contentment with whatever had been achieved by the predecessor kept them at home, which gave respite to the Sikhs from the onslaughts of Durrani forces. They utilized that time for stabilizing their rule in the Punjab.²

Not to mention others but even Shah Zaman's domestic troubles, kept him away from protecting the integrity of his Indian possessions. For instance, he tried to invade India three times during 1795, 1797 and 1799 but he could not accomplish his task due to the insurrection of his brother, Mahmood.³ Similarly, a threat from Persia, as a result of diplomatic moves of the English, who were the cautious aspirant of India's political power, had a desirable effect. The English diplomatic mission in Persia quite successfully induced its rulers to encroach upon the western part of Durrani kingdom to divert their attention from Hindustan.⁴ Shah Zaman's invasion of India in 1797 remained incomplete due to the same reason. However, it can be assumed that if Shah Zaman had not been in dilemma, he had the talent to check the Sikh insurrections. Since, he had been restricted by his circumstances he

¹ Arnold Fletcher, *Afghanistan: Highway of Conquest* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), p.56.

² *Ibid.*, p.56.

³ Lala Sohan Lal Sori, *Umat-ut-Tawarikh* (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1961), p.XI.

⁴ P.F Walker, *Afghanistan* (London, 1881), pp.18-19.

found a solution in appointing a Sikh leader, Ranjit Singh, as his governor of Punjab.⁵

As mentioned before, Ranjit Singh being a talented Sikh leader, started availing the opportunity, offered by the internecine wars in Afghanistan. For example he began claiming the territories of the Durrani rulers. Initially, being vassal of the Durrani empire he had to accept its suzerainty. However, Fateh Khan Wazir's refusal to yield Kashmir to the Sikhs in 1812 made Ranjit Singh too annoyed. He throw off the yoke of Durrani supremacy. This act of defiance on the part of Sikh leader went unpunished,⁶ which proved a great blunder on the part of Afghan ruler.

Meanwhile, the absence of strong government at Kabul encouraged the Sikhs immensely. The disintegration of the Durrani Empire in 1818 proved to be a windfall for the Sikhs. Following which, they successfully raided through Peshawar and, in 1823, the valley of Peshawar up to the gates of Khyber Pass was under the control of Sikhs.

However, keeping in view the hard resistance from the inhabitants of the Peshawar region and some other developments like the intrigues of Barakzai Sardars, made Ranjit Singh to reinstate his previous governors, the Barakzai Sardars, as tributaries of the Sikh government.⁷ Later Sikhs took over Peshawar under their direct control.

The emergence of Sikh power in Peshawar

'Peshawar remained in a constant state of excitement and confusion, passing from one ruler to another none of whom could exercise much real control over its wild occupants'.⁸ This time Sikhs had appeared upon the scene. By 1818, they had over-run the valley, as far as the gates of the historic Khyber Pass. This act of the Sikhs did not go unnoticed. Azim Khan, the Barakzai ruler of Kabul, determined to try his strength with this new power advanced with a large army from Kabul to Peshawar in 1823. Sikhs were ready for the encounter. Ranjit Singh with

⁵ J.P. Ferrier, *History of the Afghans* (London: John Murray, 1858), p.119. See also Sayyad Hussain Shirazi Karbalai, *Tarikh-e-Ahmad Shah Durrani*, p.118.

⁶ J.P. Ferrier, *ibid.*, pp.119, 149, 150. See also Sayyed Hussain Karbalai, *ibid.*, p.138. See also H.S. Bhatia (ed.), *Rare Documents on the Sikh Rule in Punjab* (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 1981), p.100. See also Gopal Singh, *A History of the Sikh People, 1469-1988* (New Delhi: World Book Centre, 1990), p.471.

⁷ Government of Punjab, *The Punjab Gazetteer: Peshawar District, 1897-98*, Lahore, 1898, pp.69-72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.65.

the choicest portion of his army crossed the Kabul River at Akora. Then, marched up to the left bank, sent Kharrak Singh with the reminder of the force by the right bank to hold in check the troops expected from Peshawar. On the other side, Azim Khan having dispatched his brother Sammand Khan to raise the Khataks and Yousafzai, who readily obeyed the summons, followed himself to Nowshera. He found Sammand Khan already engaged with the enemy on the plain to the north of the Kabul River between Nowshera and Pir Sabak, but was unable to join him because of a stream. The Pathans fought with desperate valour, but were no match against the superior numbers and discipline of the Sikhs. However, the Pathans frequently came to the adjacent low hills, and by fighting bravely made the enemy to withdraw. The Sikhs regained their advantage when Ranjit Singh, seizing a standard, led them to the victory himself. The last attempt was made at sun set by a party of 200 Yousafzai, who fell gallantly fighting. In this action 10,000 Pathans were said to have been slain. Sikhs fought with such vigor that the Afghans kept on saying, '*Toba, Toba Khuda Khud Khalsa shud*,' which means, 'God forbid, but God himself turned a Khalsa'.⁹ Sikhs casualties were also great, including the loss of a gallant old Sikh soldier, Phula Singh, on the battle-field, who was the intrepid leader of the Akali immortals. The Sardars, Azim Khan and Dost Mohammad Khan, who had not taken part in the contest fled to Kabul and Ranjit Singh advancing to Peshawar made the four brothers at that place his tributaries and, after a short stay, withdrew beyond the Indus. Azim Khan, who master-minded this military undertaking against the Sikhs, did not survive long after the humiliting defeat. After his death Dost Mohammad obtained the chief authority at Kabul, who was also aspirant to obtain Peshawar as part of his kingdom. He made two planned attempts in this regard.¹⁰

Barakzai brothers as dependants of the Sikhs

In 1826 Fateh Khan's younger brother, Dost Mohammad, consolidated his power in Kabul. Peshawar, already, as a result of the dismemberment of the Durrani Empire in 1818, fell to the four brothers, Sardar Yar Mohammad, Sultan Mohammad, Sayyed Mohammad and Pir

⁹ Gopal Singh, *op.cit.*, pp.482-83. See also H. Singh and T. Singh, *Tales from the Sikh History of Rawalpindi, Attock & Peshawar Districts*, 1st edition, The Khalsa Historical & Literary Society, 1918, pp.27-34.

¹⁰ Bute Shah Alias Ghulam Muhy-ud-Din, *Tarikh-i-Punjab*, p.98. See also H. Singh, T. Singh, *ibid.*, p.34. See also W.L.M' Gregor, *History of Sikhs* (London, 1846), pp.193-94.

Mohammad. They continued to rule Peshawar till Sikhs overpowered them.¹¹

Meanwhile, the query who would possess Peshawar became a cause of conflict between the Barakzai Sardars and the Sikhs. Constant attempts by Ranjit Singh, for getting hold of Peshawar created anarchic situation in the region. This state of affairs changed when Azim Khan Barakzai was defeated by Ranjit Singh in 1823. Following that victory, Ranjit Singh advanced upon Peshawar and captured it. Instead of ruling Peshawar directly he confirmed its old rulers as his tributaries on the condition that they would pay an annual tribute and acknowledge the overlordship of the Government of Punjab. There after, for quite some time, Sikhs remained contented with their actual territorial occupation which remained east of the Indus. Peshawar had gone through immense trouble during 1824-35. The major cause of chaos was the incapability of the Barakzai Sardars, whose disregard for administrative matters and their mutual jealousy gave way first to Sikh ascendancy in Peshawar which was followed by the arrival of Hindustani mujahideen led by Sayed Ahmed Barailvi for the deliverance of the believers of Peshawar from the Sikhs, whom they considered infidel. This triangle of forces guided by divergent motives worsened the already chaotic situation. On top of that, Sikhs annual visitation for the collection of revenue had never been less than a severe calamity. On that occasion Sikh army would demolish the buildings, uproot the beautiful trees and plants, using them as fire wood, destroy the gardens and enormous killing of innocent people would create havoc.

Sikhs were a military power of Punjab, their rise and stability both were linked with the amount of force they maintained. Similarly, force and coercion do not go by the laws of morality. The Sikhs had definitely followed the same rules, during their supremacy in Punjab and over Peshawar.

Moreover, after twelve years of maximum autonomy enjoyed by Barakzai Sardars as the tributaries of Sikhs in Peshawar, it was taken into direct control by Sikhs when, in 1834, the ex-king Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk made an attempt to recover his kingdom, by an attack on Qandahar, Ranjit Singh seized upon Peshawar and captured it. Thenceforth, till 1849, Sikhs were the undisputed master of Peshawar.¹²

¹¹ H.W. Bellew, *Afghanistan & the Afghans* (London: Searle & Rivington, 1879), p.37.

¹² Sir Alexander Burnes and Others, *Reports & Papers, Political Geographical and Commercial: Sind, Afghanistan and Adjacent Countries* (Calcutta, 1839), p.2.

However despite being out of power the influence of the Barakzai Sardars in the Peshawar was such that the Sikhs had to win them over through lavish favors. They had been assigned *jagirs* to the amount of four and a half lakhs of rupees by the Sikhs, for instance, Sayed Mohammad received Hashtnagar, Pir Mohammad, Doaba and Sultan Mohammad Kohat and Hangu.¹³

About the person and character of Sultan Mahammad Khan, Munshi Mohan Lal writes:

Sultan Mahammad Khan, the present governor of Peshawar, commonly called Sardar, is a man of middle stature. He has passed the meridian of life, and is a man fond of luxury. He is notorious for his lewdness, and is always surrounded by females both married and unmarried. He is careless of his country and government, and is always employed in ornamenting himself with splendid and precious robes, on account of which he is called Sultan Bibi, (or lady), by Dost Mahammad Khan, the ruler of Kabul, who I hear is a very just and heroic man. Sultan Mahammad Khan has thirty children, and as many have died by various illness. From the multiplicity of his children you may guess the number of his wives.¹⁴

The appearance of Syed Ahmed Barailvi on the scene of Peshawar

It was 1824 when, 'an individual made his appearance in the valley, whose short but adventurous career affords an illustration of the simplicity and superstition which has always rendered the Pathans an easy prey to the artifices and schemes of anyone who laid claim to superior sanctity. This was Syed Ahmed Barailvi'.¹⁵

The Khalifa, (Syed Ahmed), having been taught to prefer martyrdom to denial of belief, was an enemy to the infidels or Sikhs.¹⁶ He was a zealous Muslim, trained in the teaching of Shah Wali Ullah, a renowned religious leader of Muslims in the eighteenth century. The ambition of the Sayed was to play a role of a deliverer against the prevailing infidel elements. Accordingly, *jihad* was thought to be the

¹³ *Ibid.*,

¹⁴ Munshi Mohan Lal, *Journal of a Tour through Punjab, Afghanistan, Turkistan, Khurasan, Parts of Persia in Companying with Lieut. Burnes* (Calcutta, 1834), p.39.

¹⁵ Government of Punjab, *The Punjab Gazetteer*, p.66.

¹⁶ Munshi Mohan *op.cit.*, p.33.

only way left to bring normalcy in the lives of Indian Muslims. After, collecting men and material, he decided to follow the proper route for materializing his plan. He traveled through Shikarpur and Kabul, and arrived amongst Yusufzais in 1824. Soon, he managed to recruit a huge army in order to uphold the superiority of the divine faith. In view of his zeal, his admirers had high hopes. It was so overwhelming that even the four Peshawar Sardars also felt the influence. Since, they were longing to free themselves from their Sikh oppressors, therefore, they joined the crusade. Consequently, the ranks of the mujahideen were swelled by numerous adventurers. Confident of his position, the Sayed marched through Nowshera and met Sikhs near Saidu.¹⁷

On the Sikhs side, Budh Singh Sinduwalea, an old warrior, led the army who was all prepared to give battle to the fanatics. The position of the Syed was also strong but a deal between the Sardars and Sikhs worked and turned the tables on the mujahideen. The Durrani Sardars deserted the Sayed on the condition that if they kept aloof, their country would not be taken from them. They were also threatened of Ranjit Singh's approach, which they were told, would seal the fate of the Sardars, as governors of Peshawar. This stratagem had the desired effect, because the Durrani, led by Yar Mohammad, fled at the commencement of the battle. Treachery on the part of the Sardars, decided the day in favor of Sikhs. Muslims were slaughtered in great number; each Sikh killed fifteen to twenty of the runaways. And Syed Ahmed fled by Lundkhwar to Swat whence he kept up a desultory and annoying warfare with the Sikhs, directed against their convoys and small detachments. However, this defeat did not affect the Pathan's loyalty to him and he again managed, in a few months, to collect several thousand followers.¹⁸

Upon the invitation of some of the Khans he returned to Yusufzai country. Taking up his residence with Fateh Khan of Panjar, he commenced a series of exploits, which eventually placed in his hands the power of Yusufzai and the neighbouring hills. He first quarreled with Khadi Khan of Hund whom he killed and took possession of his fort and property. However, the principal chief in Yusufzai at that time was Ahmed Khan Hoti, who being an opponent of the Sayed, met with the same fate at his hands. By then, the Sayed seated himself so firmly that he started taking tithes from the Yusufzais, and his power was such as to

¹⁷ T.Thornton, *History of Punjab*, Vol. II (London: W. M. H. Allen & Co., 1846), pp.83-4. See also Gopal Singh, *op.cit.*, pp.483-84; W.L.M'gregor, *op.cit.*, p.196, and H.S Bhatia (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.131.

¹⁸ Gopal Singh, *op.cit.*, p.484. See also W.L. M'gregor, *op.cit.*, p.484. See also H.S Bhatia (ed.), *ibid.*, p.131; T. Thornton, *ibid.*, pp.83-5.

enable him to oust or uphold anyone at his pleasure. Several of the most powerful and independent of the Khans derived their authority from him, amongst whom was Mir Babu Khan of Sadham. The army of Sayed Ahmed Barailvi was not very large, composed chiefly of Hindustani fanatics, but whenever he required he could summon a host of Pathans.¹⁹

Looking upon Durrani as enemies, he kept them constantly under alarm by threatening Hashtnagar and inciting the Khybaris to annoy them on that side. Many served him who were inimical to the Barakzai Sardars who had stopped the allowances formerly paid to them by the Sadduzai princes.²⁰

Declaring the Durrani as his enemies, he took arms against them. Consequently, an encounter took place between the Sayed and the Barakzai Sardar, Yar Mohammad Khan, who the Sayed thought had sacrificed the cause of his religion by swearing allegiance to, and accepting the service from the Sikhs. Sayed Ahmed appeared in the field in great strength, sent a party at night under Maulvi Ismail to surprise his enemy. The attack was completely successful. Yar Mohammad received a mortal wound, his forces were put to flight and his camp together with six guns was taken as booty. The Sikh, however, directed that the city had to be delivered over to Sultan Mohammad Khan, brother of Yar Mohammad Khan.²¹

The Sayed now possessed almost regal power which he exercised with vigour, maintained solely by the influence he had acquired over the minds of his subjects. Meanwhile, he got hold of Painsa Khan of Amb, whose help the Sayed needed in the face of an impending expedition against Sikhs. He required a passage through the lands of Painsa Khan; however, as a result of Painsa Khan's flight the mujahideen occupied Amb and strengthened the fortification of the place.²²

The Barakzai Sardars, in 1829, having received support from Kabul once again made an attempt to expel the Sayed. Anyhow, a timely assistance in the shape of a large force at Hoti decided the day in the favour of mujahideen. The Sardars fled to Peshawar, followed by the Sayed. He threatened Peshawar, traversing through Hashtnagar, Doaba and Michni. Occupation of Peshawar was made possible by the mujahideen by the invariable support of Bahram Khan, one of the Khalil Arbabs hostile to Barakzai and Faizullah Khan Hazar Khaniwala.

¹⁹ See, *The Punjab Gazetteer*, p.66.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.67.

²¹ T. Thornton, *op.cit.*, p.88.

²² W.L M'gregor, *op.cit.*, p.197. See also H.S Bhatia, *op.cit.*, p.134.

Especially, the latter due to whose efforts negotiation took place between the two parties. Consequently, the Sardars acknowledged the supremacy of the Syed and received him at Peshawar as a master of the region. The victorious Syed remained in the city for three days only. Leaving for Panjtar, he left Maulvi Mazhar Ali as his deputy at Peshawar.²³

Seated at Panjtar, attended by his followers, he avoided all stately pretensions and maintained a life of austerity and devotion. However, his stern regime was not tolerated by even the Pathans, who were ready to lay their lives at his slightest gesture. The superstitious reverence which they had for the Sayed, advocated that he possessed the faculty of silencing guns and rendering bullets harmless. However, that did not work in the face of insolence during the collection of tithes by his soldiers and the interference with Pathan customs and usage. The Afghans have retained many peculiarities contrary to Mohammadan law and usage. The strictly orthodox, mujahideen were shocked at the open sale of the daughters carried on by Pathan. Syed Ahmed ordered to prohibit this practice immediately. He decreed that all Pathans should give their daughters in marriage at an early age without receiving money. In the absence of any other alternative the girls might be claimed by their nearest relatives. However, he found too late that he was thereby exceeding his limits.²⁴

Consequently, the Yusufzais remonstrated and threw off their yoke of allegiance. They hatched a plot and accordingly, slaughtered all the soldiers and agents, appointed by the Sayed, through out the country. Maulvi Mazhar Ali and Faizullah Khan Hazar Khaniwala met the same fate. The excited Yusufzai chiefs, in the pursuance of the Sayed flocked to Panjtar. But the timely aid of an ally, Fateh Khan, saved him from the brunt of the rebels. The broken-hearted Sayed, with a few followers first fled to Tahkot and then shifted to the Valley of Pakli.²⁵

Thus, ended his partial ascendancy of little more than four years, over Peshawar. However, his Hindustani followers did not betray him; they flocked to him in his new settlement. The same year (1830), Sher Singh bringing an army from Kashmir, gave battle to the mujahideen near Balakot. Syed Ahmed and his companion Maulvi Ismail with

²³ W.L. M'gregor, *op.cit.*, pp.197-98. See also T. Thornton, *op.cit.*, pp.89-90.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.90-1. See also Gopal Singh, *op.cit.*, p.484. See also Shahamat Ali, *Sikh and Afghans in Connection with India and Persia*, (London: John Murray, 1847), p.273.

²⁵ T. Thornton, *ibid.*, pp.90-9. See also Shahamat Ali, *ibid.*, pp.273-74. See also W.L M'gregor, *op.cit.*, pp.198, 484.

Bahram Khan, the Khalil Arbab, were all killed on this occasion.²⁶ So, the charisma of the Sayed and his movement came to an end. His followers in Hindustan had difficulty in believing that he was dead. There is a legend amongst his followers and disciples that he went away alive and is yet to reappear for the extirpation of the infidels.²⁷

Sikhs become the real masters of Peshawar

The victory at Nowshera in 1823 against Azim Khan, ruler of Kabul, gave way to Sikhs as the new rulers of Peshawar. Ranjit Singh being prudent, avoided taking the reins of government in his own hands, allowed the previous rulers, Barakzai Sardars, to continue as governors although the reversal of this policy took the life of an intrepid Sikh commander, Harri Singh, in 1837.

During that period, the Sikh army would only visit Peshawar for collecting the annual revenue, which had to be paid by the inhabitants of Peshawar in cash and kind. No fix amount was levied in this regard, whatever, they deemed fit would grab from the people. During those years Sikhs had nothing to do with the administration and welfare of the people. Their major concern was to plunder and loot the resources of Peshawar in order to utilize them for the consolidation of Sikh rule in Punjab.

The rivalry of Sayed Ahmed Barailvi and his followers had not been taken very seriously by the Sikhs. It seemed that they did not pay much heed to his power and influence. Though, they fought battles against him but later seeing the rivalry between the Sardars and the Sayed, they turned to be vigilant spectators, and let them settle the score between themselves. This policy of the Sikhs bore results; the Sayed eventually had to flee along with his few followers. Among the reasons of his flight from Peshawar, one was definitely the antagonism of the Barakzai Sardars that disheartened the Sayed and he disappeared from the scene.

However, complete elimination of the Sayed and a few of his followers was the act of a Sikh commander, Sher Singh, at Balakot in 1830. Disappearance of the mujahideen and the regular flow of revenue from the valley of Peshawar, kept the Sikhs contented. However, a major change had come into that policy by the year 1835. The cause of that change was Dost Mohammad Khan's preparations to fight against Sikhs for the possession of Peshawar. Though, he made an unsuccessful attempt and retreated to Kabul due to the treachery of his brother, Sultan

²⁶ T. Thornton, *ibid.*, p.91.

²⁷ Burnes et.al, *op.cit.*, p.3. See also Gopal Singh, *op.cit.*, pp.491-92.

Mohammad, however, through this incident, Sikhs understood that Durrani rulers of Kabul still had the ambition to capture Peshawar; consequently, proper defence of Peshawar became imperative for the Sikh government. The need to take direct control of Peshawar was deeply felt and in 1835-36 the reins of government were taken over by the Sikhs.

Hari Singh, a brave Sikh commander, who was familiar with the area and its people since long, had been appointed as the first Sikh governor. Having the administrative charge in his hands he began to strengthen his position by building a fortress on the site of Bala-Hisar and garrisoned it. The Sikhs sought to strengthen their position by erecting a new fort, called Futtehghur, near Jamrod, opposite the Khyber Pass. The fort of Attock was also repaired and cannoned with a force. Despite all those efforts for establishing Sikh rule on firm ground, Sikhs utterly failed to achieve their objective.²⁸

The law and order situation was in shambles. People sternly resisted their tyrannical rule, for instance, many Arbabs, known people of the area, fled to the hills where they organized predatory bands and introduced subversive activities in Peshawar. Roads were unsafe and to be outside the vicinity of the city during dark was not out of danger. The Sikhs rule was absolutely unpopular among the residents of Peshawar. Another factor which further destabilized their rule, was the presence of Sardar Sultan Mohammad in Bajaur, who being excellent intriguer, would create problems for the Sikh government, for instance he devised schemes with a Mir Alim Khan of the upper Mohmand in order to create troubles for the Sikhs in Doaba. He at the same time, following the policy of duplicity, kept corresponding with the Sikh headquarters at Lahore, in the hope of recovering the possession of Peshawar for himself. Keeping in view, the difficulties and expanses for maintaining Peshawar, Ranjit Singh reconciled with the Sardar and granted him a fief consisting of Hashtnagar, half Doaba together with Kohat and Hangu.²⁹

Meanwhile Hari Singh, having immense contempt for the Pathans, decided to occupy the post of Jamrud, in order to vigilantly observe the movements of the tribes and to thwart their subversive plans in time.³⁰ However, its impact on the government of Kabul was totally different. The Amir took it as a preliminary step for further advance on his territories. Similarly, the presence of his two brothers, Sultan

²⁸ Government of Punjab, *The Punjab Gazetteer*, p.72. See also Gopal Singh, *ibid.*, p.492.

²⁹ *Ibid.*,

³⁰ Shahmat Ali, *op.cit.*, p.54. See also, *The Punjab Gazetteer*, p.73.

Mohammad and Pir Mohammad in Lahore was enough to strengthen the apprehensions of the Amir. In order to check the moves of Sikhs, the Amir of Kabul sent an army against the Sikhs under the command of his son Akbar Khan. A battle ensued during which Hari Singh Nalwa, the Sikh commander was badly wounded and died the same night. However, the victory could not be claimed. The forces of Amir left the field that night and the Sikhs did not pursue them.³¹

However, it served the purpose of both the sides. It clarified two things for the Amir of Kabul that Sikhs were not interested to cross beyond the Khyber Pass and secondly, they were strongly based in Peshawar and had no intention to let it go out of their hands. Thence, the Amir of Kabul did not march on to Peshawar and kept himself busy in the consolidation of his kingdom. On the other hand, Sikhs realized that they were strong enough to defeat the forces of Amir of Kabul. Consequently, they remained the unmolested masters of Peshawar till the British overthrew them in 1849.

Sikhs administrative set up in Peshawar

The Sikh administrative set up comprised three territorial zones, which could be identified from the actual exercise of power. The first was the core zone, the heart-land of the Punjab, which extended from the Sutlej to the Jehlum. This was the first to be occupied and was the closest to the capital. Practically the whole of this zone had come under Ranjit Singh's control and management by 1810. The later conquests made in west Punjab, especially between the Indus and the Jehlum constituted the intermediate zone which included the *subas* of Multan and Kashmir. The third one was the peripheral zone, comprising territories on the borders of the kingdom, such as Peshawar, Hazara, Dera Ismail Khan, Dera Ghazi Khan and Bannu-Tank.³²

The control of the center on the peripheral area of Hazara, the *suba* of Peshawar and other administrative units of the north-west frontier region was even less than what it was in the intermediate zone. For one thing the trance-Indus districts of Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu, Dera Ismail Khan and Dera Ghazi Khan were taken under direct management and control only in the last seven or eight years of the reign. Hazara was brought under direct administration much earlier but most of the time

³¹ Fauja Singh, *Some Aspects of State and Society under Ranjit Singh* (New Delhi: Master Publishers, 1982), pp.87-8, 90-91; also Shahmat Ali, *ibid.*, p.72, and *The Punjab Gazetteer*, *ibid.*, p.72.

³² *Parliamentary Papers-H.B Edwards to the resident at Lahore*, Mayen, 1847, p.93.

there was one rebellion or another going on in this difficult mountainous tract. The *suba* of Peshawar as well as the districts of the region were toughest areas to be administered. They were constantly exposed to danger from the Amir of Kabul and the several unruly Pathan tribes inhabiting the mountainous valleys of the Sulaiman range. More often than not troops had to be commissioned to coerce people into paying their taxes to the government. The state of affairs such as that and the region's long distance from the capital naturally demanded that the chief administrators on the spot should be entrusted with a much greater degree of independence of action than elsewhere so that they might be in a position to deal effectively with the local problems. That was why Hari Singh Nalwa and after his death, in 1837, Avitabile were given a considerable free hand in the discharge of their administrative responsibilities. But again this did not mean that they were entirely left to themselves to use discretion in any way they liked. Ranjit Singh could not afford to ignore it because the borderland was a very sensitive area and vitally involved the question of security of the state as a whole. He kept a constant and vigilant eye on the happenings of the region. Quite a large proportion of his armed forces were stationed at strategic points in the area, mostly in and around the city of Peshawar which was the most vulnerable spot in that whole territory. That meant that besides the governor of Peshawar *suba*, there were several other high dignitaries of the state either encamped there, on their way to Peshawar, or returning from there to Lahore. Through them and also by means of his intelligence officials the Maharaja always managed to keep himself well posted with up-to-date information about the border areas. And there are cases on record when Maharaja did not approve of the decisions of the Nizam of Peshawar and reversed them. For instance when Avitabile penalized some residents of Peshawar by imposing a fine and demolishing their houses, General Ventura was ordered to reach Peshawar in great haste to make Avitabile return the two hundred rupees he had unjustly taken from the Khattris of the place and rebuild, at his own expense, not exceeding 15,000 rupees, the houses demolished by him.³³

In fact, Sikhs administrative set up in Peshawar was based on superficial arrangements. For instance, they were the real rulers of Peshawar only, through strong Sikh military garrison, stationed in the fort. Other than that, Shabkadar and Bara forts were maintained as military out-posts. The rest of Peshawar was retained by the local chiefs, under Sikh overlordship. Reason being, hard resistance from the people

³³ Government of Punjab, *Gazetter of Peshawar District*, 1883-84, pp.59-60.

of Peshawar against Sikh rule and heavy expenditure on large scale administrative set up.

Moreover, Ranjit Singh, remained contented with the policy of greater autonomy to the west of the central zone of the kingdom particularly across the river Indus, where different clans and tribes (mostly Pathan), had developed over the centuries very potent and compact brotherhoods. Power was exercised over there by the local bodies far more effectively. Although, acknowledging the *Khalsa* supremacy and paying all demands made by the Sikh governor, each Khan was still a despot so far as the management of his khanship was concerned, and imposed taxes, levied fines, and in many instances punished capitally without further responses. The authority of the Lahore government was always admitted and often asserted but subject to that people were left to wrangle among themselves and to settle their own disputes with sword and dagger. Tribal authority was relied on to keep society together and prevents anarchy, and revenue was the only care.³⁴

Suitable under the circumstances, through such a policy the Maharaja tried to lessen the annoyance of the people and reduced his anxiety as well. Allotment of *jagirs* to the Barakzai Sardars of Peshawar was a prudent decision on his part. For instance, assignment of Hashtnagar to Sayed Mohammad Barakzai, saved the Sikh from direct contact with the turbulent Mohammadzais and all the petty frontier tribes connected with Swat.³⁵

Similarly, the Sardars presence in Doaba prevented them from the restless Mohmands. Only a portion of that area was retained by the Sikhs for the security of which garrison was cannoned and a fortress was built by Tej Singh in 1837. The chief men, Arbabs, of Khalil and lower Mohmand were assigned large grants of lands. Strict care was observed in assigning to them the *jagirs*, consisting of villages immediately under the hills, in order to keep a buffer zone between the turbulent tribesmen and Sikhs. Ranjit Singh showed practical statesmanship and excellent grasp of the realities of the situation. He was in tune with the practices and prevailing conditions there.³⁶

Similar grants were made to the chiefs of remote and powerful villages because collection of revenue was extremely difficult from those

³⁴ Bhagat Singh, *Sikh Policy in Eighteenth & Nineteenth Centuries* (New Delhi: Oriental Publishers & Distributors, 1978), pp.255-56.

³⁵ See also Shahmat Ali, *op.cit.*, p.22.

³⁶ *The Punjab Gazetteer, op.cit.*, pp.74-75.

parts of the country. After forgoing the revenue of those areas Ranjit Singh secured his rule in the frontier region.³⁷

In the Yusufzai country the Sikhs could not establish themselves permanently. No troops were cannioned there and no direct or constant management was set up because that would have embroiled the Sikhs in a prolonged struggle with those tribes. Kohat and Hangu were assigned to Sultan Mohammad Barakzai, since that area was occupied by savage tribes, therefore, no interference was made in that territory. State share, however, from the nearest parts of Peshawar was collected by the Sikhs themselves.³⁸

With regard to the land in the province of Peshawar, it is said that except from the peculiar rich lands the government demand never exceeded one-third and usually averaged one-fourth or one-fifth and fell even lower down to one-eighth of the crop.³⁹

To be more specific, at Peshawar, the land revenue system of the Sikh was the same as it had been before. However, in 1837 the state demand was slightly raised by Tej Singh. Since the situation in the area was precarious therefore its full realization was not possible. Consequently, in 1838 General Avitabile reduced the amount. In the following year the situation stabilized so a minimal increase of one-fifth was introduced. As a result, the revenue rose to nearly nine lacs rupees. Until 1842 those rates continued with title-alteration, when Tej Singh, who succeeded Avitabile, increased the amount of state share.⁴⁰ Fixed revenue was received from the Yusufzais along with some extra fees. The total amount drawn from the region of Peshawar was ten lac rupees.⁴¹ No material and general change was subsequently made in the revenue system, until the British took over.

Moreover, the revenue of the villages had to be submitted to the Arbabs and influential chiefs or in the absence of such men the land was leased to Hindu capitalists. The nominal share of the produce, claimed by the government, was one-half but that was not final, extra fees were demanded and advances had to be adjusted. The revenues were mostly collected in kind. General prosperity was lacking besides strife and litigation was common. Similarly, bloodshed over water used for irrigation was also very frequent. The government officials involved in

³⁷ Gopal Singh, *op.cit.*, pp.255-56.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.255-56.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.26.

⁴⁰ Shahmat Ali, *op.cit.*, p.278.

⁴¹ *The Punjab Gazetteer, op.cit.*, p.75.

nepotism would favour the high and wealthy at the expense of smaller land owners.⁴²

During Sikhs rule, the law and order situation within Peshawar was in a terrible shape. Sikhs hardly attempted to maintain the internal order of the locality. Similarly their attitude towards the Muslim clergy-men was based on prejudice, for instance, Shahamat Ali records:

Formerly several grants of land were allotted to the Mullahs and Sayeds; but since the introduction of the Sikh rule many of them have been resumed, which has added much to the revenue. Among others, Mullah Najib, a pensioner of the British Government, has suffered great loss in the resumption of his lands. Poor man! In his old age, and with a large family, he deserved rather to be relieved than distressed; but the Sikhs I believe, appear more willing to injure the Mullahs than any other Mahomedans because they are considered the only persons who inculcate war against the Sikhs. Mullah Najib, however, is not of these; and enjoys a small pension from the British Government for services performed to Mr. Elphinstone.⁴³

Moreover, blood feuds between large administrative units, villages and families were unchecked. At the most, government interference would be up to levy fines only. Inroads and raids from beyond the frontiers usually remained unavenged, unless driven to desperation by their constant recurrence. Even then, the tribes of the plain would retaliate under the guidance of their own Arbabs and Maliks. The Pathans, in fact, continued to govern themselves by their own code of life, which was devolved to them by their forefathers. The laws of that code offered to their wild natures a mode of avenging wrongs and adjusting disputes more suitably than the courts of infidels. The Sikhs failed to reduce the occurrence of crimes and bloodshed. Similarly, inroads were not checked unless those were directed against the Sikhs.⁴⁴

The Sikhs system of justice at Peshawar can be well understood from a few instances that had been observed by the onlookers, for instance, Henry Durand relates, 'Avitabile, the Nazam of Peshawar had been performing judicial functions when the latter visited the former'. He writes, 'I called upon Avitabile and found him employed in giving

⁴² J.S. Grewal & Indu Bemga, *Civil & Military Affairs of Maharaja Ranjit Singh* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1987), p.61.

⁴³ Shahmat Ali, *op.cit.*, pp.278-79.

⁴⁴ *The Punjab Gazetteer, op.cit.*, p.76.

decisions with his judges around him. Two Qazis, two Hindus and two Sikhs formed his conclave'.⁴⁵

Avitabile used to administer justice in Gorkhatri. He was a man of very strong character showed great acuteness and common sense and was dreaded more than any other person in Peshawar.⁴⁶

Moreover, Sikhs system of punishments instead of demonstrating the sense of justice and certainty, was cruel and severe. For instance, a thief could hardly ever escape with life, they would certainly be hanged. Similarly Honigberger relates that, '*Musalmans*, relaying on the presence of a Christian governor Avitabile, once broke the Sikh law against cow-killing, whereupon Avitabile hanged them, remarking that though he himself saw no crime in the matter but he was bound to carry out the Sikh laws'.⁴⁷

Sikhs followed a policy of blood and iron in Peshawar and in the surrounding areas. They would frequently destruct the refractory villages and the gibbets outside the city walls and kept up the fear of their arms. The members of hill tribes were considered a race for extermination, and were invariably sent to gallows upon apprehension. Sikh severity could be judged from another example, Karm-ud-din Khan of Chamkani held his *jagir* on the condition that he should produce annually twenty Afridis' heads.⁴⁸

Consequently, Sikh rule was hated by the common men as well as the chiefs. For instance, the Arbabs and Maliks constantly fled to the hills in order to defy the Sikh rule. Tax evasion and conducting a system of warfare on the border, if strong enough, were their normal activities. However, such men were usually restored to their former position with favours and enrichment. The case of Mohammad Khan Arbab had to be mentioned here, who fled to the hills of Adam Khel Afridis, where he remained for four years. In his absence the Sikh appointed somebody else of that area but he was unable to control the matters there. Therefore, Mohammad Khan was recalled by General Avitabile in 1840, under the guarantee of a *jagir* of Rs. 6,000, subsequently increased by Tej Singh and Sher Singh to Rs. 8,550.⁴⁹ Similarly, the Khalil Arbabs,

⁴⁵ Gopal Singh, pp.288-9.

⁴⁶ H. Singh, T. Singh, *op.cit.*, p.42.

⁴⁷ Bhagat Singh, *op.cit.*, p.292.

⁴⁸ Shahmat Ali, *op.cit.*, pp.206-07. See also *The Punjab Gazetteer*, pp.76-7; Sir William Wilson Hunter, *Rulers of India: Ranjit Singh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), pp.146-47.

⁴⁹ Shahmat Ali, *ibid.*, pp.280-81.

behaving in the like manner, were also recalled with a guarantee of 12,000 rupees *jagir*, the revenue of which was remitted to them.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Keeping in view, all the hazards, which the Sikh rule faced during its tenure, if they had evacuated the Peshawar at the death of Hari Singh Nalwa, the first Sikh governor of Peshawar, who had an ability to handle the refractory residents of the region, it would have been in the best interest of the Sikhs. Hari Singh was daring enough to check the members of hill tribes with iron hand. His death was the signal of Sikhs failure in the frontier region.⁵¹

Also, no financial gains were secured by Sikh, after holding the direct control of Peshawar. Most of its parts were retained by the local chiefs; even the revenue obtained from the area where Sikhs were strongly seated was spent on winning over the turbulent citizen of the province. Maintaining their rule in Peshawar did not serve the monetary interest of the Sikhs but it served the purpose of border defense against Afghan rulers.

⁵⁰ *The Punjab Gazetteer, op.cit.*, p.76.

⁵¹ Alexander Burnes et.al, *op.cit.*, p.3. See also Shahmat Ali, *op.cit.*, pp.280-81.