

# **Anglo-Sikh Relations**

## **&**

# **The World Wars**

*When this mortal life reaches its limits  
May I die fighting with limitless courage*  
(Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (1666 – 1708))

**Gurmukh Singh**  
(Principal, UK Civil Service ret'd)

**A word by Dya Singh (Australia)**

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**“There are 500,000 Sikhs in the United Kingdom. In the past, hundreds of thousands of Sikhs voluntarily fought with the British Army in the two World wars and many of them died in the cause of freedom. They were among the most highly decorated soldiers in history. Today, British Sikhs contribute a huge amount to the economy and to public life in the UK.”**

**Prime Minister Tony Blair’s message of 1<sup>st</sup> November 2001, to the Maharajah Duleep Singh Centenary Trust.**

## **The need for this publication**

This compact study is for the busy reader and looks at the history of the Sikhs over the last two hundred years in the context of Anglo-Sikh relations. It is work in progress, as the author’s intention is to periodically add new material as it becomes available.

Much has been written about the internal politics of India over the last 150 years. Historians have been mostly pre-occupied with the reformation movements in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, with India’s struggle for independence in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and with India’s internal divisions and problems during the post-independence period.

Too often, the sacrifices of thousands of *jawans*, who rose gallantly above short-term political considerations and gave their lives for the longer-term freedom of mankind, have been ignored. The politicians can learn something from their great selfless sacrifice during the two World Wars. Perhaps there is a cryptic message for the politicians of the Indian sub-continent in the name of an ex-army association in the UK. It is called the “Undivided Indian Ex-soldiers Association”!

In the UK, the contribution made for the war effort by soldiers from Britain’s ethnic minorities is hardly remembered. Yet, in a multi-cultural Britain, it is important to educate children of all races about what their forebears did to give them the freedom they enjoy today.

In addition to the role of the Sikhs in the two World Wars, this study also looks at the reasons for the Anglo-Sikh friendship over the last 200 years from the simple perspective of the ordinary people of Panjab. It is less concerned with complex political-power brokerage - wheeling and dealing - which was in the hands of a few.

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### Some common Sikh words used

**Javan** – A young man. In the army, the word refers to a non-ranking soldier.

**Khalsa or Khalsa Panth** – The Sikh nation formally established by the Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh on the Vaisakhi day on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1699. *Khalsa* refers to Sikhs generally. *Khalsa* may be used in a singular or plural sense. The *Khalsa* way of life is based on Guru Nanak's founding principles.

**Khalsa army** – The army of the people of Panjab raised during the reign of Maharajah Ranjit Singh. Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus and some Europeans were employed in this army. The British Panjabi regiments (as distinct from purely “one class” Sikh regiments) continued with this practice.

**Misl** – Main groups of the Khalsa army in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Punjab** – More correctly spelt as “Panjab”, means the land of “five rivers” which lies north-west of Delhi and is now divided between India and Pakistan. Panjab has its own ancient language and culture.

**Raj** – rule e.g. “Khalsa Raj” referred to the administration of Panjab based on *Khalsa* principles. “The Raj” referred to the British rule in India.

**Sikhi** - is preferred to “Sikhism” as a religious path and way of life.

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# A WORD

## by Dya Singh (Australia)

Sikhs have always been keener on making history and very slack in recording it. As new information comes to light, especially from British sources (because Sikh history is closely linked with the British since Maharajah Ranjit Singh's time from the early 1800's), there is a need for Sikh writers especially history research students, to pore over these sources (which will keep coming up) and write and re-fresh Sikh history. This is all important because Sikhs do not truly have a land of their own any more. Even present-day Panjab in India does not have a Sikh majority, and belongs to India and Indians, rather than to the Sikhs.

The Sikhs today are a universal 'quom' (nation), thanks partially to the British, and the rest to Indian (including Sikh) politicians. For that reason, it needs to write its own History down and preserve it. The famous Mandla v. Lee case in UK projects Sikhs as an 'ethnic minority' which goes a long way in establishing Sikhs truly as an international community without any borders and not just a 'religion'.

Rather than lamenting the fact that we do not truly have a geographical location of our own into the future - we should revel in it! We are a Sikh 'quom' (nation) without any borders. We are truly international citizens in the global village called planet earth.

To help this 'quom', special institutions need to sprout worldwide to maintain its beliefs, its culture, its identity and its language for future generations. Our roots, into the future, are within us, not in some special geographical location. To put a positive spin on it, we have roots throughout this planet – '*Jithay jae bahay mera satguru, so thaan suhava...*' (Wherever my Guru Ji goes and resides, that place is blessed.) That place is 'Guruan-dhi-dharti' (land of the Gurus).

Sikh history museums, and Sikh sections within famous museums, are already being established worldwide. Sikh artifacts lie in British museums – some known to us and on display, and some as yet hidden away to come to light at a later date. There are Sikhs worldwide who dedicate themselves in collecting old photographs, drawings and artifacts for posterity. Sikh exhibitions are held regularly worldwide. Sikh monuments, like the Sikh Archway in Bangkok, and a war memorial planned in Coventry, UK, are materialising. There is a memorial monument planned in the town of Kampar in Malaysia where a Sikh regiment fought a valiant rearguard action against the Japanese invading forces in 1939.

Perhaps a Gurmukhi/Punjabi Language Institute needs to be established solely to look at new words being added to our vocabulary and furthering the language.

Panjab will always play a very important role in our lives, however much it deteriorates, as the original 'Guruan-dhi-dharti', but we are now, into the new millennium, a global community.

On another note - today, due to this close relationship between Britain and Sikhs, the Sikhs of UK, who make up the largest pocket of Sikhs outside Punjab, have a very responsible role to play for the future direction of the Sikh 'quom' worldwide. They can play a lead role in furthering Sikh ideology and as a resource for other Sikhs worldwide. This is a role which is not, of late, forthcoming from our institutions in Punjab namely the Akal Takht and the Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee.

There was a time when far-sighted British civil servants like Cunningham and Macauliffe, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries researched and wrote about Sikhs and Sikhism leading to the revival of Sikhism after the end of Sikh Raj. Principal (Rtd. British Civil Service) Gurmukh Singh Ji, with almost 40 years' experience as a British civil servant to Principal level, is playing a similar role.

His is a 'civil servant-like' role amongst Sikh organisations since 1984 to attempt to revive the concept of 'Sarbat Khalsa' in UK. He realises the importance of a platform where all the various Sikh organisations with differing agendas can come together periodically or when the need arises for a collective Sikh voice. With his experience in the British civil service, he is also fully conversant with the behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing of the British government and its Civil Service - experience which Sikh organisations can do with when British Sikhs have to deal or negotiate with the British government.

The Sarbat Khalsa was a twice yearly meeting of all the various 'misl's to sort out strategies and resolve differences and grievances with each other so that they could carry out their individual duties yet working for the 'Panth'.

After numerous attempts in UK which included the British Sikh Consultative Forum [an open forum with Gurmukh Singh Ji acting as the administrative secretary], such attempts inevitably got scuttled by selfish interests. Perhaps this was a period for the various Sikh organisations and its office-holders to gain experience in working together, gaining maturity and understanding the 'Sarbat Khalsa' principle a little better. The recently formed Sikh Council of UK (SCUK) has now taken on the semblances of a Sarbat Khalsa-type concept - a sort of Secretariat of Sikh organisations in UK attempting to bring the various Sikh organisations together for consultative purposes. If this concept succeeds in UK, under the strong Anglo-Sikh relationship that has been built in good times and bad since the end of Khalsa Raj, this could be the harbinger for such a concept for the Sikh 'quom' worldwide.

After a chance meeting of Gurmukh Singh Ji with an ex-British (Indian) Army veteran Colonel Schlaefli, who lent him a priceless limited edition book/diary of the Sikh Regiment, he has written this remarkable book espousing the Sikh Miri-Piri tradition in the context of Anglo-Sikh relations.

This is not a dry History book but more an easy to read Story book. He has also seamlessly linked this close, mainly military, relationship to the core life philosophy of Sikhism namely the 'saint-soldier' tradition. The Anglo-Sikh military history appears as a natural progression in time, of the core values of Sikhism.

Gurmukh Singh Ji has shown that this Anglo-Sikh relationship is certainly not that of a vanquished race with that of its masters. When needed, the Sikhs gave their lives alongside the British for freedom, especially against fascism. Yet, when it came to fighting for Indian independence against the British, this community was, without question, in the forefront. For a community which is less than 2 % of the Indian population, their sacrifices have been calculated at above 80 % (hangings and life imprisonments)! So, as a friend, or as a foe, the Sikhs are certainly held in high esteem in British eyes.

On a broader base, after reading this book, it will appear that Sikh 'itehas' (history) can be categorised into the following eras:

1. Gurus Period :1469 - 1708

2. Banda Bahadur & Misls :1708 to 1799
3. Khalsa Raj – Panjab Empire (Maharajah Ranjit Singh: 1799 to 1845)
4. British Raj – Pre World Wars: 1845 to 1914.
5. First World War : 1914 - 1918
6. Between World Wars – arguably Punjab’s Golden years: 1918-1939
7. Second World War: 1939-1945
8. Partition and collapse of Punjab as an autonomous Sikh state and beginning of Sikh Diaspora : 1947 – present day. (*Not only was Punjab partitioned between India and Pakistan, but under Indian Independence, it was further dissected into Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab.*)

Gurmukh Singh Ji has synthesised the Guru period remarkably well in terms of Sikh ideology setting the scene for things to come. Quite rightly he has not made much mention of the ‘misls’ period nor the Sikh Empire and Maharajah Ranjit Singh’s time, as his main thrust is Anglo-Sikh relations. The ‘misl’ period too plays a very important part in the development of the Sikh psyche - perhaps the topic for another book?

His focus on the world wars and the period in between shows the direction ‘Sikh’ fortunes, in a strong relationship with Britain, have taken us so far.

For the reader who knows very little about Sikhs and Sikhism, this book will be a revelation. To the student of Sikh history, this book has some very interesting observations of this very unique relationship between the British and the Sikhs, who form the largest minority religio-ethnic group in Britain. For the Sikh, this book is our ‘quom’ linked to recent history perhaps more from the ‘miri’ angle than the ‘piri’ angle.

Fortunately for us, there are plenty of organisations, ‘sants’, ‘sadhs’, ‘brahmgiyanis’, books on Sikhism, ‘kirtaniyas’, ‘percharaks’ and other missionaries of Sikh ‘religion’ in India and amongst diaspora Sikhs to satisfy the ‘piri’ aspect of Sikhism, but there are few books or other tools, to spread greater awareness of the ‘miri’ aspect.

Our history (itihās) plays a very important role from the ‘Miri’ aspect of Sikhism, to invoke a sense of pride and identity amongst future generations of Sikhs. This book is an eye-opener as to the direction the ‘miri’ aspect of Sikhism is taking us. This book awakens or further consolidates a sense of pride in all matters ‘Sikh’ including a growing universal Sikh identity.

We hope and pray for the best for our institutions in Punjab and India generally, in shaking themselves off of the shackles of sycophancy, corruption and general deterioration, and dynamically leading Sikhs worldwide into the future. This is a forlorn hope but a hope nevertheless. Meanwhile, Sikhs worldwide, especially British Sikhs need to be ready to step forward to establish their own ideological and cultural institutions, for the sake of Sikhism.

On the 30<sup>th</sup>. Anniversary of the attack by Indian forces on Darbar Sahib, the Akal Takht and other Sikh gurdwaras in Punjab now referred to as the Third Ghalughara (Genocide) (1984) and the 100<sup>th</sup>. Anniversary of the First World War (1914) where Sikhs gave their lives for the sake of human freedom alongside the British, I take the opportunity of wishing the Sikh ‘Quom’ a very Happy Anniversary Year!

**Lest we forget.**

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# “From Jawans to Generals” Wellington Arch Exhibition

## Chance meeting with Col. Robin Schlaefli, author of “Emergency Sahib”

On 1 May 2002, Prince Charles launched an exhibition, ““From Jawans to Generals: Loyal Allies, Proud Britons” at Wellington Arch, Hyde Park Corner, London. The exhibition ran from 2 May to 3 November 2002.

As part of the literature for the exhibition, Harbinder Singh Rana, the Director of the Maharaja Duleep Singh Centenary Trust, had invited me to write about the Sikh martial tradition from a Sikh ideological perspective. The modest contribution was appreciated and acknowledged prominently on a display board with five other names. That contribution, revised and expanded, is included in the first part of this book.

I was visiting the family in Australia when the exhibition was inaugurated. Harbinder Singh Rana expressed regret that I missed the opportunity to be introduced to the Prince, but that I should at least drop in to see the exhibition on return. This I did in March with my journalist friend late S. Kesar Singh Mand of Southall, UK.

As we walked around admiring the exhibits, we met a tall and slim white gentleman. This was Col Schlaefli. For correct spelling he pointed to his name amongst the six on the display board, as I did mine. A most interesting conversation followed in which he encouraged me to write more about interesting episodes in Sikh military history for the ordinary, and especially, younger readers.

After Harbinder Singh, he is probably the reason for this book, first drafted about eleven years ago. Not only had Harbinder Singh left many books with me for research, but it was Col. Schlaefli who sent me the comprehensive rare record of “The Sikh Regiment”. I believe the volume has been published recently.

It took a very determined effort to go through this comprehensive diary to extract readable episodes of Sikh military history. This is a first attempt and I propose further updates following revision.

Gurmukh Singh  
20 April 2014

## Introduction

*“I would like to talk about the 15<sup>th</sup> Century in India when Guru Nanak was born. This was a dark period when Indians were divided among themselves and demoralised. They worshipped many gods and were shackled by superstitions. Then Guru Nanak came and proclaimed: “There is but One God, whose name is true – the Creator, devoid of fear and enmity, immortal, unborn, self-existent, great and bountiful” – What a wonderful creed to preach. The Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, founded in 1699 the Khalsa. 147 years later new Regiments were raised from the remnants of Khalsa who were given the title of the 14<sup>th</sup> Ferozepore Sikhs and 15<sup>th</sup> Ludhiana Sikhs.....”*

(Admiral of the Fleet, the earl Mountbatten of Burma speaking at the 500<sup>th</sup> Birthday Anniversary of Guru Nanak at Grosvenor House in Park Lane in December, 1969.)

*“56 years ago I joined the 15<sup>th</sup> Ludhiana Sikhs in Loralai, Baluchistan and at once became imbued with the teachings and the life of Guru Nanak. The Sikh Gurus, the Sikh religion, the Gurdwara, the Granth Sahib became part of my life. The British and the Sikh officers of the Regiment were convinced that religion was an important factor in the make-up of a good soldier and we fostered that in every way possible.”*

(Brigadier the Rt. Hon. Sir John Smyth, Bt. VC, MC speaking at the 500<sup>th</sup> Birthday Anniversary of Guru Nanak at Grosvenor House in Park Lane in December, 1969.)

## **Friendship between two nations**

Over two hundred years ago, history brought two nations together. These were Britain and the Sikh Kingdom of Panjab in the north-west of the Indian subcontinent. Their mutual respect for each other, first as warriors, and later, through better understanding of each other's way of life, evolved into lasting friendship.

However, this friendship did go through some difficult times, especially after the death of the ruler of Panjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, in 1839. There were two Anglo-Sikh wars, the first in 1846 and the second in 1849. Some famous battles were fought during these wars between the Khalsa army of Panjab and the combined forces of India and the British. A famous Panjabi poet Waris Shah described these wars as wars between *Hind* (India) and Panjab. Following these wars the Sikhs lost their kingdom but won the respect of the British military commanders, politicians and scholars alike. The British rulers of India studied the Sikh religious history and their proud military tradition. They realised that the Sikhs of Panjab would make loyal allies, and gallant soldiers or *jawans* who would make generals one day.

## **From trustworthy allies to loyal Britons**

From the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, many Sikhs migrated to the United Kingdom. From loyal allies during the two world wars they have now become proud and loyal Britons in a truly multicultural British society. The Sikhs make up the largest ethnic minority in the United Kingdom.

Following a presentation celebrating 300 years of the Khalsa Panth, an English Member of Parliament commented, "I can now understand the reasons for our friendship. Five hundred years ago Guru Nanak gave you an ideology based on human equality and dignity. While you, the Sikhs, have been aspiring to live up to that ideology, we have been discovering the same values through social and political experience in the West. We both have some way to go to achieve the goals set by Guru Nanak for the modern human society."<sup>1</sup>

The story of that Anglo-Sikh friendship continues today.

## **PART I: THE SIKH TRADITION**

### **1. The Sikh warrior tradition and Sikh teachings**

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Ainsworth MP.

*Grant me this boon O Lord  
That I may never refrain from righteous deeds  
May I fight without fear  
With certainty claiming victory  
May my highest ambition be singing your praises  
And may your glory be grained in my mind  
When the end comes  
May I die fighting with limitless courage.*  
(Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, *Chandi Charitar, Dasam Granth.*)

The foundation of the Sikh saint-warrior concept had been laid in the First Guru, Nanak's teachings. He preached truthful conduct and righteous living. The language he used was robust and his challenge to his followers was clear:

“If you desire to play the game of love (i.e. follow this path to the Lord God), step my way with your head placed on your palm. Having thus set foot on this path, lay down your head without fear or grudge.” (Guru Nanak, *Guru Granth Sahib* p. 1412)

Under the leadership of the Sixth Guru, Hargobind (1595 – 1644), the Sikhs took up arms to defend the faith following the martyrdom at Lahore in Panjab, of the Fifth Guru, Arjan Dev in 1606. However, it was the Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (1666 – 1708) who finally transformed the Sikhs into the order of the Khalsa; a nation which combined spiritual and worldly aspects of life as saint-soldiers. The earlier Akalis (also called Nihangs) amongst the Sikhs were totally devoted to the Khalsa cause and formed the nucleus of the Khalsa army.

Western scholars started taking interest in the Sikh tradition. The first truly authentic book on Sikhs, based on the study of the Sikh scriptures, *Guru Granth Sahib*, and the Sikh saint-warrior tradition, was completed by J. D. Cunningham (1812 – 1851) in 1849. He was an eye-witness to the last days of the great Sikh kingdom of Maharajah Ranjit Singh. The book was published at about the same time as the annexation of Panjab by the British in 1849.

Cunningham wrote about the *Khalsa*:

“The last apostle of the Sikhs [Guru Gobind Singh who died in 1708] did not live to see his own ends accomplished, but he effectually roused the dormant energies of a vanquished people and filled them with a lofty although fitful longing for social freedom and national ascendancy, the proper adjuncts of that purity of worship which had been preached by Nanak. Gobind saw what was yet vital, and he relumed it with Promethean fire. A living spirit possesses the whole Sikh people and the impress of Gobind has not only elevated and altered the constitution of their minds, but has operated materially and added amplitude to their physical frames. The features and external form of a whole people has been modified....”<sup>2</sup>

British scholars were surprised and much impressed by what they discovered. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Max A Macauliffe (1841 – 1913) started his six volumes<sup>3</sup> on the Sikhs and the Sikh scriptures with the words:

“I bring from the East what is practically an unknown religion. The Sikhs are distinguished throughout the world as a great military people, but there is little known even to professional

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<sup>2</sup> Cunningham J D. *History of the Sikhs* p.75.

<sup>3</sup> Macauliffe Max Arthur. *The Sikh Religion*.

scholars regarding their religion.” He went on to write, “As we shall see hereafter, it would be difficult to point to a religion of greater originality or to a more comprehensive ethical system.”

## 1.1 How do you recognise a Sikh?

*So long as the Khalsa remains distinct, my spiritual power shall be with the Khalsa*  
(Guru Gobind Singh.)

The Tenth Sikh Master, Guru Gobind Singh gave his Khalsa a distinct identity. Not all Sikhs keep the full external identity these days but you can still tell if a person belongs to the Sikh faith. Those who carry the full Sikh or Khalsa identity will be wearing a Sikh style turban (*dastar* or *pagri*) and keeping what are popularly known as the 5Ks : *Kesh*: unshorn hair; *Karha*: iron bracelet; *Kirpan*: sacred sword (small or full length); *Kangha*: small wooden comb; and, *Kachhera*: special style agile underwear. The Sikh turban and three of the 5Ks can be seen. Even clean-shaven Sikhs would be wearing the iron bracelet on the right hand. Also, every man has the common Sikh name “Singh” (meaning “lion”, representing courage) in his full name, and every Sikh woman has the name “Kaur” (meaning “princess”, representing grace) in her full name.

The Guru placed great stress on Sikh identity and there are good historical reasons for that. He felt that only with a distinct identity would they develop the inner courage to face evil. His mission was clear:

“To uphold righteousness, to lift the good and to destroy evil.” (Guru Gobind, *Bachittar Natak*.)

Each of the 5Ks has great significance for the Sikhs. This was the Guru’s challenge to his Khalsa: if you are afraid to walk before the world in your distinct Khalsa identity, you are insulting your courage and spiritual identity. The Guru’s spiritual power shall only remain with you so far as you are not afraid to show your true and distinct identity, physical and ideological.

## 1.2 Sikh teachings

**In addition to keeping unshorn hair, the Khalsa must not smoke or use any intoxicants, must not eat ritually killed meat and must not commit adultery. The Khalsa must follow the teaching of Gurbani, the Guru’s teachings in Guru Granth Sahib.**

Three very simple rules preached by Guru Nanak for a good life are:

- 1) Meditate on God’s Name (be conscious of God’s presence everywhere)
- 2) Do honest work
- 3) Share your earnings with others in need

*Sewa*, meaning serving of all without discrimination, with humility and without expectation of any reward or return is the Khalsa way of life. From this principle of *sewa* arise the institution of *langar*, the Sikh community kitchen (at Gurdwaras and wherever needed). All are welcome in the *langar* and treated as equals. The idea of *sewa* leads the Sikhs to serve others, to make

sacrifice for others and, **only as a last resort**, to take up arms to defend the weak and the oppressed.

The Khalsa is ever ready to defend the weak and will not hesitate to give own life for a just cause.

“When all other means have failed, it is just to resort to the sword.”  
(Guru Gobind Singh, *Zafarnama* – His “letter of victory” i.e.ultimate victory of right over wrong, to Emperor Aurungzeb.)

So, Guru Nanak’s religious ideology is based on these very simple rules:

*Live with zest and in joy by doing hard and honest work*  
*Obtain union with God through meditation on the holy Name*  
*Thus you shall get rid of anxieties* (Guru Nanak, Guru Granth Sahib p.522 )

*A resting place at God’s court can be found only through the devoted service of the people in this world.* (Guru Nanak, Guru Granth Sahib p.26)

Guru Nanak (1469-1539) dedicated his new age religion to democratic ideals of a classless society in which *sewa*, selfless service of mankind became the means to reaching the ultimate goal of human life: a harmonious relationship with the Creator Being.

Guru Nanak’s message was a message of peace on earth, “Let universal brotherhood be  
The highest aspiration of your religious order (Guru Nanak, Guru Granth sahib p.6)  
The Khalsa Panth remembers this message by concluding their daily prayers:  
“May the entire humankind be blessed with peace and well being.”

### **1.3 Sikh institutions based on Guru Nanak’s teachings**

All the Sikh institutions and traditions developed by the ten Sikh Masters or Gurus between 1469 and 1708, are based on the simple life principles mentioned above. The Sikh tradition regards the Guru personalities as changing human bodies with the same light and spirit of Guru Nanak. The Guru is really the teaching of the Gurus. This teaching is also called *Gurbani*, the Guru’s Word which, the Sikhs believe comes from God. The Guru’s Word is God on earth for the Sikhs. It is that Word in Guru Granth Sahib that the Sikhs study and worship and pay their respect to. The Sikhs do not worship any human gurus or any other deity but only One God Being represented by *Gurbani*, the Guru’s Word in Guru Granth Sahib. They seek daily guidance by reading and understanding *Gurbani*, which is their “living Guru”.

The commitment and courage of Guru Nanak’s Khalsa to the creation of a just human society in which discrimination of any type had no place, was to be tested to the limit during and after the period of the Guru personalities (1469 – 1708).

## **2 Sikh struggle for human rights: The martyrdom tradition**

It did not take long for the egalitarian and socially liberating ideology of Guru Nanak to clash with the interests of the rulers and religious bigots. Emancipation of women, abolition of the evil caste system, and the Guru’s condemnation of fear inspiring

superstitions and rituals threatened the whole Hindu Brahmanic religious system based on caste and social divisions. At the same time the Guru was challenging the oppression of the ruling classes: these were the nawabs, the rajahs, the feudal landowners called the *jagirdars*, the corrupt judges and the Moghul Emperors at Delhi. Taxes were very high for the poor people while the nawabs and maharajahs lived in great luxury. There was no law and order. The price paid willingly by the Gurus and the Sikhs for their liberating ideology was heavy.

The Fifth Guru, Arjan Dev was tortured to death (30<sup>th</sup> May, 1606) on the orders of the Mughal emperor Jehangir. In a letter dated 25<sup>th</sup> September, 1606 from Lahore where the Guru was martyred, Father Zerome Xavier, a Jesuit priest, wrote, "In that way their good Pope died, overwhelmed by the sufferings, torments and dishonours."<sup>4</sup>

It annoyed the bigoted emperor that the Guru had organised the Sikhs around two great institutions: the Sikh scriptures, Granth Sahib (later bestowed with Guruship by the Tenth Master, Guru Gobind Singh); and, establishment of a Sikh centre at Darbar Sahib (also known today as the Golden Temple), around which grew the prosperous trading city of Amritsar. The holy Granth taught human values and a God loving relationship in the common language of the people. Unlike any other religious book, it included teachings of liberal saintly scholars called *bhagats* from different religious backgrounds. Darbar Sahib, where the Granth was placed, became a rallying centre for the Sikhs and as such was seen as a threat by the rulers and the priests of the major religions and sects.

The Ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur was beheaded (11<sup>th</sup> November, 1675) on the orders of the Mughal emperor Aurungzeb for raising a strong voice of protest against the forced conversion of the Hindus to Islam.

"Who like him there ever was in the world  
Who sacrificed his head that the others might live?"  
(Panjabi poet and historian Bhai Santokh Singh)

This was the first time in human history that the leader of one religion gave his life to save another religion. Although the Sikh warrior tradition had started with the Sixth Guru, Hargobind, tenth master Guru Gobind Singh gave the Sikhs the organisation and the discipline to succeed as saint-warriors. He had four sons. His elder two sons died in the memorable battle of Chamkaur Sahib. His younger two sons were martyred by the Nawab of Sirhind, despite strong public protests. Hundreds of Sikhs gave their lives in battle or were tortured to death over the next six decades (1708 – 1765). However, the invincible spirit instilled into his Khalsa by the Guru triumphed in the end. The Khalsa, with popular support from all communities, established a kingdom under the leadership of Maharajah Ranjit Singh (1780 - 1839). (Much of the area north of Delhi, between rivers Jamna and Sutlej – cis-Sutlej area - was already ruled by Sikh princedoms by the time Maharajah Ranjit Singh came to power in 1799, exactly one hundred years after the establishment of the Khalsa nation by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699.

### **3. The Sikh States**

The Mughal rule in India weakened in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and many small and different types of states came into being. Beside the Mughals trying to restore their rule, the main contenders for power were the invaders from the north, the Persians led by Nadir Shah,

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<sup>4</sup> *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism* (Vol.1) p.193, Punjabi University, Patiala, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. 1998.

the Afghans having the support of Ahmad Shah Durrani<sup>5</sup> (1722 – 1772), and some Maratha chiefs trying to move in from the south to fill the power vacuum. Some European adventurers like George Thomas also started moving north into Panjab.

The Sikhs were not slow to grab the opportunity. They organised themselves into groups called *misls*. These *misls* took control of much territory in Panjab soon after the resounding defeat of the Afghans at the hands of the Khalsa led by Sardar Jassa Singh Ahluwalia near Sirhind in January 1764. While the area north of Sutlej was eventually consolidated by Maharajah Ranjit Singh into one Khalsa Raj, much of the area south of this river and north of Delhi was taken over by the Phulkian *misl* and divided into the Sikh states of Patiala, Nabha, Jind and Kaithal. Some of the other *misls* also established their own states south of Sutlej. One outcome of this struggle for power was the weakening of the Sikh commonwealth through internal conflicts. This disunity amongst the Sikh states was exploited by the British who finally emerged on the top in the power struggle in India. The Khalsa Raj north of Sutlej was the last to fall to the combined British and Indian forces in 1849.

#### 4 Summary

At the time of Guru Gobind Singh's death in 1708, the Sikh community had all the characteristics of a distinct religion and nationality. It had its own scriptures, Guru Granth Sahib, compiled by the Fifth Guru, Arjan Dev and it had at Amritsar, Panjab, their temporal seat *Akal Takhat* built by the Sixth Guru, Hargobind. The Sikh community as the *Khalsa* had distinct external appearance and a code of conduct. It had at that time in history a cherished heritage of ten Sikh Gurus over a period of nearly 250 years. The Sikhs were a distinct Khalsa nation known for their sense of sacrifice and bravery.

A great scholar in the holy darbar (court) of Guru Gobind Singh wrote a couplet, which has ever since been a source of inspiration for the Sikh nation. It reads, "The Khalsa shall rule. No-one shall remain hostile. Frustrated, all shall submit and those who come for shelter shall be protected." This couplet has become the concluding part of the Sikh congregational prayer and is sung by all with great enthusiasm.

This *chardhi kala* (rising spirit) of the Khalsa was strengthened by a long line of great Sikh martyrs and warriors. Sikh history summarised in the daily prayer of the Sikhs mentions the sacrifices of men and women alike. The emancipating teachings of the Guru not only produced many women martyrs and leaders but also made great warriors of the common people regardless of caste or profession. This was a new resource available to the Khalsa army provided by the liberal and equalising Khalsa ideology; a resource denied to their enemies.

Thousands of Panjabi youth, mainly from the oppressed Hindu communities, converted to Sikhi. During the *misl* period, it became the tradition in Hindu families for the eldest, or one of their sons to take Amrit (Sikh initiation) and join the growing Khalsa army of freedom fighters. One such youth was the legendary warrior-general Hari Singh Nalwa in the Khalsa army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He became the commander of the North-west Frontier provinces of the Khalsa Raj and stopped the annual invasions from the

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<sup>5</sup> Also called Ahmad Shah Abdali, of the Abdali tribe of Afghanistan, was the first Sadozai ruler of Afghanistan and founder of the Durrani empire. He attacked India many times from the north and destroyed the Sikh centre, Darbar Sahib at Amritsar in April 1762. He was finally defeated by a combined force of Sikh *misls* in 1764. He died in 1772.

north, a debt independent India has yet to acknowledge. (As so many other stories of Khalsa heroes, the epic story of Hari Singh Nalwa has yet to be shown on the big screen.)

The high point of Khalsa's struggle for the freedom of the people of Panjab was reached by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the Khalsa ruled most of the land north of river Jamna (i.e. north of Delhi) and Maharajah Ranjit Singh established the united Khalsa Raj of the Panjabis north of River Sutlej. This was also the time when the Anglo-Sikh relations were formally established through the Treaties of 1809 with Sikh states, including the empire of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

## **PART II: ANGLO-SIKH WARS AND CHANGING ANGLO-SIKH RELATIONS**

### **1. Early Anglo-Sikh Treaties**

The British rulers of the Indian subcontinent saw a fearless and freedom-loving spirit in the Sikhs of Panjab. This spirit had already turned the tide of history on the Indian subcontinent by the time the two nations met at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (the first Anglo-Sikh Treaty was signed in 1806 and the second, which established a clearer



relationship was signed in 1809 at Amritsar). Such a nation could not be subdued for long; but would be a powerful ally. Thus developed a lasting Anglo-Sikh friendship tested only when either side overstepped their mark.

## 2 The Anglo-Sikh wars

The first test came following the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780 – 1839). No successor with the necessary qualities of leadership emerged and there was much disunity amongst those in positions of power in the Maharaja's household. Traitors to the Sikh cause emerged and started working secretly with the British agents. Correspondence between Sir John Cam Hobhouse<sup>6</sup>, the then president of the Board of Control in the UK and Lord Hardinge, Governor-General of India (1844 - 48), and Lord Dalhousie, Governor-General of India (1848 – 56) during that period clearly show the British plans to annexe Panjab. These plans were in place before there was any tension along the Indo-Panjab border. The British started building up their forces along the boundary of Panjab in late 1845.

The Khalsa army became restless and crossed River Sutlej to face the perceived British threat to the Sikh kingdom. Two wars were fought: the first in early 1846, and the second in early 1849. There were a number of skirmishes during these wars, of which three were decisive. The most famous was the Battle of Chilianwala on 13 January 1849. This was a last ditch stand by what remained of the Khalsa army. Such was the bravery of the Sikhs despite the treachery of their own generals in earlier battles, that a Muslim Panjabi poet Shah Mohammad<sup>7</sup> wrote, "We won the battle but we lost the war." Sheer numbers decided the outcome. Even the British generals admired the courage and the fighting skills of the gallant Sikhs. Soon after the annexation of Panjab on 29 March 1849, the British decided to raise Sikh battalions to form part of the Indian Army of the British Raj.

The British played an important part in preserving and promoting the Sikh religious and cultural identity, and Sikh martial tradition. The Sikhs were also given important positions in the Indian Civil Service and recognised as shareholders in the British Raj. Some argue that the British were using the Sikhs as guardians of the British Raj. However, it must be remembered that India was far from being one nation at the time. In fact it was the British Raj which brought about some sort of unity amongst the Indians. Both, the British and the Panjabis benefited from the Anglo-Sikh friendship. However, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when the real struggle for Indian independence began through increased political awareness, the Sikh nation was again in the forefront.

## 3 Khalsa's martial reputation in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The importance of Sikh alliance for the British Raj in the following one hundred years, stretching over the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and two World Wars, may be assessed from their reputation as warriors. How did others see the Sikhs in the battlefield in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries?

*"If you cherish the desire to learn the art of war, face them on the battlefield. When they hold the mighty sword, they gallop from Hind to Sind. Nobody, however strong and wealthy, dare oppose them.....Each of them is built like a rock. In grandeur, each one of them excels fifty men."*

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<sup>6</sup> Hobhouse papers are available in the form of five volumes in the British Library.

<sup>7</sup> The poetry of Shah Mohammad, a Panjabi Muslim, also shows the Panjabi character of the Khalsa Raj in which all the communities of Panjab were shareholders.

(Quazi Nur Mohammad, *Jang Namah* (Battle Chronicles), 1765.)

The above was the reputation of the Khalsa in the enemy's camp following the decisive defeat of Ahmad Shah Abdali, one of the greatest generals of the time, at the hands of the Khalsa at Sirhind in 1764. Between 1765 and 1781 the Khalsa overran Delhi many times and held sway over all the countryside north of Delhi. Yet this was a nation which had nearly been wiped out by Ahmad Shah Abdali in the great *Galughara* (The Great Killing or Holocaust) of 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1762. This is the great warrior tradition of the Khalsa.

A witness of the Anglo-Sikh wars writes:

*“Our English cavalry with their blunt swords were most unequally matched against the Sikhs with tulwars so keen of edge that they would split a hair....I remember reading of a regiment of British cavalry charging a regiment of Sikh cavalry. The latter wore voluminous thick puggies round their heads which our blunt swords were powerless to cut through, and each horseman had also a buffalo hide shield slung on his back. They evidently knew that the British sword was blunt and useless, so they kept their horses still and met the British charge by laying flat on their horses' necks, with their heads protected by their thick turbans and their backs by their shields; and immediately the British soldiers passed through their ranks, the Sikhs swooped round on them and struck back-handed with their sharp curved swords, in several instances cutting our cavalry men in two....”*

Sgt William Forbes Mitchell (93<sup>rd</sup> Sutherland Highlanders) writing of the Anglo-Sikh Wars, *Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny 1857-59* (Macmillan London 1910).

In the Sikh *jawan* (soldier), the British saw a unique blend of courage, intelligence and fighting skills. The British were also becoming aware of the noble tradition and reputation of the Khalsa which even the old enemies of the Khalsa grudgingly acknowledged. Such men would rise from *jawans* to generals in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

#### **4 Indian Mutiny of 1857**

The first test of Anglo-Sikh friendship came very shortly with a general uprising in India. There were many unconnected reasons for this uprising. It started on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1857, in the Bengal Army<sup>8</sup> of the East India Company based at Meerut. One reason was religious: Indian soldiers refused to use their ammunition cartridges, which had a coating of cow or pig fat – the cow being sacred for the Hindus and the pig being highly objectionable for the Muslims. The cartridges could only be opened for use by biting the top off. Soldiers started disobeying the orders of their British officers and the mutiny broke out. As the mutiny spread so other motives and causes became attached to it<sup>9</sup>! One was to re-establish the medieval “glory” of India by returning to Mughal rule under which the Sikhs had suffered such severe forms of persecution. The Muslims wanted to re-instate their Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah (2<sup>nd</sup>). Some Indian princes and *jagirdars* (feudal landlords) joined in to restore their lost glory. The mutiny broke out when the Sikhs were still feeling the treachery of east Indians (the *Purbia Rajputs*), as a result of which Khalsa Raj had been lost. Also the last thing they wanted was a return to the old Mughal raj. It needs to be remembered that there was hardly any idea of Indian nationalism or patriotism at the time. Otherwise, thousands of Indian

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<sup>8</sup> The East Indian Company, which ruled India on behalf of the British Government, had three armies based at Calcutta (in Bengal), Bombay and Madras. These were called the three Presidency armies.

<sup>9</sup> A hundred years later it is even remembered as the “first struggle for Indian independence”. In fact there was no such concept as “nationalism” or “patriotism” at the time. Loyalties were divided and stretched to local chiefs and large landowners only.

soldiers would not have fought under the British against Panjab, the only major independent state left in India. It was the Muslim Panjabi poet Shah Mohammad who wrote about the Second Anglo-Sikh war in 1849, "Today the war between India and Panjab has started."

Apprehensive about returning to the bad old days, the Sikhs cast their lot with the British and the mutiny was crushed by the combined British and Sikh forces. One example of Sikh bravery is as follows:

"Amongst the native officers killed [during the Mutiny] was Subedar Ruttan Singh...He was a Patiala Sikh and had been invalided from the service. As the 1<sup>st</sup> Punjab Infantry neared Delhi, Major Coke saw the old man standing in the road with two swords on. He begged to be taken back into the service....Coke acceded to the old man's wish and throughout the siege of Delhi he displayed the most splendid courage. At the great attack on the Sammy House, Ruttan Singh, amidst a shower of bullets, jumped on to the parapet and shouted to the enemy, who were storming the piquet: "If any man wants to fight, let him come here, and not stand firing like a coward! I am Ruttan Singh of Patiala." He then sprang down among the enemy, followed by the men of his company, and drove them off with heavy loss."  
(Field Marshall Lord Roberts V.C.; K.P.; *Forty-one years in India, from Subaltern to Commander-in-Chief* (Macmillan and co., London, 1902)<sup>10</sup>

(See also Annex II: The Truth About the Indian Mutiny of 1857  
by Dr Ganda Singh)

## 5 New Sikh regiments raised

**An irregular force was raised after the first Anglo-Sikh war in 1846 from the disbanded Khalsa army. The force was increased in strength after the second Anglo-Sikh War in 1849 and became known as the Punjab Irregular Force. The old Sikh regiments 14<sup>th</sup> (Ferozepore) Sikhs and 15<sup>th</sup> (Ludhiana) Sikhs raised in 1846 were part of this Force.** Other famous regiments raised soon afterwards were the 36<sup>th</sup> Sikhs (became world famous following the Battle of Saragarhi in 1897); 45<sup>th</sup> (Rattray's) Sikhs were first raised by Captain T. Rattray<sup>11</sup>. They first served as a policing force before becoming a regiment of the Bengal Native Infantry.

Major General Sir Harry Lumsden raised the Corps of Guides in 1846 when he was a lieutenant and commanded it for the next sixteen years. "Lamsden sought men notorious for desperate deeds, leaders in forays, who kept the passes into the hills and lived amid inaccessible rocks. He made guides of them: tempted by regular pay and enterprise, many joined the corps and became conspicuous for daring and fidelity."<sup>12</sup> They were the first of the Indian regiments to wear khakhi uniforms.

Later the Punjab Irregular Force was called the Punjab Frontier Force (nicknamed the Piffers). Panjabi Muslims were included in these regiments (reflecting the composition of the Khalsa army of Maharajah Ranjit Singh).

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Madra & Singh, "Warrior Saints" p. 73

<sup>11</sup> "Rattray had a novel method of finding recruits. He would go among the villages, offering to wrestle with all and sundry, only stipulating that the competitors enlisted. Since wrestling was a favourite sport of the Sikhs, he never had trouble finding his regiment." Madra & Singh, *Saint Warriors*.p.70

<sup>12</sup> Major H. Daly, *Memoirs of Gen. Sir Henry Dermot Daly* (John Murray, London, 1905 quoted in *Saint Soldiers*.

The Sikh states south of River Sutlej had separate treaties with the British. There is little doubt that many Sikh *jawans* (soldiers) were already in the British Indian Army well before 1846. Due to the Sikh warrior tradition, there was no shortage of recruits and the number of Sikh battalions in the British Indian Army rose rapidly, especially after the Indian Mutiny in 1857 (see below).

Before the Indian Mutiny, recruitment of Sikhs was restricted to 100 in each regiment of the regular army (excluding the purely Sikh regiments which were in the Punjabi Frontier Force.) One estimate on this basis is that the total number of Sikhs in the regular army was restricted to 7,400 (in 74 regiments) at the time<sup>13</sup>. Only Jat Sikhs (from the farming community) were recruited at the time.

However, the British policy about Sikh recruitment changed after the Mutiny. Eighteen new regiments from Panjabi marshal communities, mainly Sikh and Muslim, were raised in Panjab during and after the Mutiny. Soon Sikhs other than Jat Sikhs were allowed into the army.

## **6. Burmese and North-West Frontier campaigns**

The Sikhs also fought well in the Anglo-Burmese wars of 1852 and 1886 following which Burma was annexed to the British Empire. Large numbers of Sikh families migrated to Burma in the following decades. Sikh battalions e.g. the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs took part in North-West Frontier expeditions in the eighteen sixties, the second Afghan war in 1878 and the Waziristan expedition in 1881, and Waziristan and Chitral expedition in 1894-95.

The record of the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs records the death of a Sikh officer:

Before reaching Bannu, Subadar-Major<sup>14</sup> Didar Singh of the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs died on the 20<sup>th</sup> May [1881]. He was a splendid soldier and had held office as subadar-major for ten years. He had served in the Regiment since 1854 and had received his first promotion for good service at Lucknow in 1857.” Clearly, this was one of the Sikh soldiers who had helped to crush the Indian Mutiny in 1857.

The bravery of the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs in the siege of Chitral in 1895 was outstanding, Captain Townsend, the Commanding Officer wrote in his report, “The spirit of the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs was our admiration; the longer the siege lasted the more willing they became to teach the enemy a lesson. There could not be finer soldiers than the men of the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs, and they were our Sheet-anchor in the siege.” Sir Francis Younghusband wrote in his *Relief of Chitral*, “As long as a Sikh was on sentry, while Sikhs were holding a threatened position, Captain Townsend had nothing to fear.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1895 the Presidency armies were abolished and the “Army of India” was divided into four commands: Madras, Bombay, Bengal and Punjab.

Sikh regiments were also sent abroad e.g. to East Africa to fight Sudanese mutineers and others.

## **7 The Epic of Saragarhi 12<sup>th</sup> September 1897**

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<sup>13</sup> Singh, Khushwant, *A History of the Sikhs, Vol. 2*. Ch.6, p.111.

<sup>14</sup> In those days the highest rank for non-British officers of the Indian Army. Such officers usually came from reputable families with military backgrounds.

<sup>15</sup> Talbot, Colonel E. E. G, *The 14<sup>th</sup> King Georges Own Sikhs*, p.48

“Fighting against overwhelming numbers, they all died at their posts, with unflinching loyalty and devotion to their oath while upholding to the very last, the traditional bravery of the Sikh nation”. (The Commander-in-Chief, India).

This was one of the most heroic actions in recorded history fought by a small detachment of 21 *jawans* of the 36<sup>th</sup> Sikh (since redesignated as the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Sikh Regiment of the Indian Army). The action was fought at Saragarhi in North West Frontier Province, now in Pakistan and close to the Afghanistan border. Saragarhi was a small army post, a small square stone blockhouse built on a high ridge called the Samana Ridge. The post provided vital communication between Fort Lockhart and Fort Gulistan on either side of the Saragarhi post. One hundred and twenty-one *jawans* of the 36<sup>th</sup> Sikhs were in Fort Lockhart and 175 in Fort Gulistan at the time. You need to remember that communication those days was by visual signalling equipment<sup>16</sup>.

Several thousand Pathan tribesmen attacked this small post on the morning of 12<sup>th</sup> September 1897. They surrounded the post so that no help from the other units could reach in time. These *jawans* under the command of Havildar (sergeant) Ishar Singh<sup>17</sup> fought a memorable battle killing over three hundred attacking tribesmen. The last person to join the battle was the signaller, Sepoy (soldier) Gurmukh Singh, who had until then kept the battalion headquarters informed of the situation. He asked permission from headquarters to stop signalling, took up his rifle and fell fighting single-handed. The valour of these heroes of Saragarhi won wide acclaim and they were posthumously awarded the highest military honours for gallantry. Battle Honours were also awarded to their battalion, 36<sup>th</sup> Sikhs.

It is not surprising that following epics like the battle of Saragarhi and the earlier Anglo-Sikh wars, the gallantry of the Sikh battalions became legendary. The military fame of the Sikhs spread worldwide. The Sikh units of the Indian army became role models for others. They provided a source of inspiration for others while convincing the British commanders that the Sikh soldiers could stand their ground against the best in the world. It is with this background that we need to assess the contribution of the Sikhs to the two World Wars fought for the freedom of mankind - a contribution, which is sometimes forgotten by the politicians or overlooked by the military historians.

## **8 Strategic importance of the North West Frontier**

The British interest in the North- West Frontier of the Indian sub-continent (the mountainous area along the border between Panjab and Afghanistan ) first arose in 1807 when Napoleon and Tsar Alexander I of Russia met at Tilsit town in western Russia) and decided on common action against the British control of Indian states. From that time the British began to realise the importance of Afghanistan and the neighbouring Iran. The danger was that these countries would join the French and the Russians in their plans to start taking over India from the north-

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<sup>16</sup> “Helio” using mirrors in sunlight or “semaphore” using visual signals i.e. flags, lights or mechanical arms.

<sup>17</sup> Havidar Isher Singh was reputed to be a colourful character true to the Sikh fighting tradition. A Jat Sikh peasant from Panjab, the independent type who enjoyed his drink as well as a good fight. He always supported his men and gave them extra privileges e.g. “commandeered neighbouring units meat-on-hoof” to give his own men extra rations! While he was a trouble-maker in the eyes of his superior officers, he was certainly the ideal commanding officer for the task in hand at Saragarhi. He inspired his men to give the best final performance of their military careers. It is recorded that when the tribal leaders came outside Saraghari with offers of surrender, Isher’s reply in their own language pushto “was certainly unprintable” and so was his subsequent response to their threats. During the battle Signaller Gurmukh Singh was keeping up regular reports to his officers in Forts Lockhart and Gulistan on either side of Saragarhi.

west. These concerns about India being invaded from the north-west remained during the First and the Second World Wars. That is the reason that the North-West Frontier provinces remained important in the British defence plans for India. The Sikhs, from the day the order of Khalsa was established on 29<sup>th</sup> March, 1699 by the Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, have always played an important role in this respect. This was one important aspect of Anglo-Sikh treaties and alliance. Of all the Indian martial races, only the Sikhs had the respect of the fierce frontier tribesmen<sup>18</sup>.

(A full military assessment of the contribution of the Panjabi Khalsa Raj (1799 to 1849) to the longer term defence of the Indian sub-continent has yet to be made and duly acknowledged by modern Indian historians.)

## **9 Anglo-Sikh relations by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

During the Indian Mutiny, the North-West Frontier campaigns and in battles like Saragarhi, the Anglo-Sikh solidarity had been tested to the limit. The Anglo-Sikh relations were at their best by the turn of the Century.

However, the British were also aware that the Sikhs would never fully accept the loss of their kingdom and always kept a watchful eye on Sikh activities while bestowing honours on them. When the freedom struggle against the British occupation of their country did come, the freedom loving Sikhs were in the forefront. They made over 80% of the sacrifices in that struggle.

We have looked at the 19<sup>th</sup> Century background to the Anglo-Sikh relations. We now look at the role of the Sikhs in the two World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. On the Indian sub-continent and abroad, the Sikhs were destined to play a most important role.

## **PART III THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

### **1. Sikh regiments before the First World War**

#### **1.1 Presidency armies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras.**

The Indian army units were raised by the East India Company in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, for military and administrative purposes, India was divided into three Presidencies of Madras, Bombay and Bengal. After the Indian Mutiny, by which time the East India Company had ceased to exist, the units became part of Her Majesty's Forces. In May 1857, each Presidency, Madras, Bombay and Bengal, had its own separate army. There were two types of troops: Royal troops of the British regular army, and Honourable East India

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<sup>18</sup> This respect started with the frontier conquests of Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa, a leading Sikh general of the Khalsa Raj.

Company (HEIC) troops which included both British and Indian units. The Bengal Presidency stretched right across Northern India from Calcutta, the headquarters of the British Government, to Peshawar in the North-West Frontier. This is the reason that the first Sikh regiments raised the 14<sup>th</sup> (Ferozepore) Sikhs and the 15<sup>th</sup> (Ludhiana) Sikhs were part of the “Bengal Infantry”<sup>19</sup>.

The three Presidency armies remained as separate entities but included Indian troops only. These were abolished in 1895. From then, all mention of the designations of old Presidency armies was omitted.

## **1.2 Recruitment from martial races: “One class” or “All class” Army units Was this part of British “divide and rule” policy in India?**

Did the British invent the “divide and rule” policy in India or did they just inherit it from the Indian social and political system which existed before their arrival? It is said the British introduced the idea of the “martial race”. Some say that this was part of the British policy of “divide and rule” in India. “Divide and rule” means that divided and disunited people remain weak, and, therefore, are easier to rule. Sometimes they would even fight each other. This makes it easier for the colonial rulers to extend and prolong their hold over a country. One method is to first side with the weak to defeat the strong through own combined strength, and then to subdue own weak ally without any difficulty! All colonial adventurers in India used this method but the British mastered it. It was not too difficult to make the maharajahs, the nawabs and small princedoms fight against each other because they had been doing this for centuries anyway! Each was more concerned about taking over the neighbours’ territory, or seeking revenge for some insult caused, than about the *farangi’s* designs.

It is important to discuss this topic to see if it was the British who introduced this idea of a martial race as part of their divide and rule policy.

In his classic book, *A Matter of Honour*, Philip Mason of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) says that the division of the people of India into “martial” and “non-martial” classes was not an invention of the British. In fact, it was the recognition of such divisions which were already there in the Indian social system. He says, “It was common sense to see the reality of it, and not waste effort in trying to turn money-lenders [the Indian Bannias not renowned for bravery] into soldiers.”<sup>20</sup>

In the Indian social thinking, each caste has its own function and duty. According to Manu, the author of the Indian caste system, it is better to do own duty badly than another’s well. The warrior caste is a separate *Kshatrya* caste under that system. In fact it was the Sikh Guru who first introduced the concept of a casteless Khalsa, capable of defending own rights and fighting for a just cause. Nevertheless, what Philip Mason wrote is true about the Indian social system. It was not the British who introduced the idea of martial races or “one class” army units. They simply made the best use of the system, which they took over.

The British had much experience of international and colonial wars and of “one class” units, in which soldiers from the same area were recruited. Indian martial races (e.g. Sikhs, Panjabi Muslims, Rajputs, Dogras, Gurkhas, Marathtas etc) are proud of their tradition and the areas

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<sup>19</sup> This must be the reason that the first Sikh migrants to South-East Asian countries like Malaya (now Malaysia), who followed the Sikh army and police units were called “Bengalese”. These Sikh (“Bengalese” to local population) were both respected and feared.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in the *The Sikh Review*, December 1998 p. 35.

and towns they come from. The British fighting units with proud traditions were also based on regions in the United Kingdom and men were recruited from the same area e.g. regiments were named after cities in England and regions like Scotland. Tradition and background does matter in frontline battles. People hide fear in danger due to pride and honour, and what colleagues would tell others on returning home. This point is illustrated by a true story of Captain Balbir Singh Sandhu during an Indo-Pakistan war.

“Balbir along with other troops, was thrown back from Chhamb by the Pakistani offensive. When Balbir lay critically wounded in a military hospital, his father, a senior police officer, went to see him. The only thing Balbir could say was, “Look father, all the bullet injuries are in my stomach and chest and none in my back.” Then he passed out. What had weighed heavily with Balbir was that his people may think that he was wounded while withdrawing (running away!) from the battle.”<sup>21</sup>

Until the arrival of the Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh in 1699, India had an unbroken record of military defeats stretching back to over a thousand years. It was not the British who weakened India through any policy of “divide and rule”. If at all by using the skills of the martial communities like the Sikhs they created a world class Indian army, which could face the best in battle. This was proved by the Sikh battalions who spearheaded the Indian army on many battlefronts in the two World Wars. They won by far the most number of military awards for bravery as compared with any other Indian martial community.

Other than the combat units, the British did employ non-martial races in support services e.g. engineers, signals, and even artillery. A large number of mixed or all class army units were also formed especially during the war. Many support units were mixed. Sikhs were taken in large numbers into these units also. The tall, upright and well built Sikh *jawans*, proud of their distinct identity were to be found in all the different branches of the British Indian Army at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

## 2 Nature of Sikh allegiance to the British Raj

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the commitment of the Sikh nation to the Anglo-Sikh alliance, and through that friendship, to the King and the British Empire was not in doubt. Events like the Indian Mutiny, the North-West Frontier campaigns, the Burmese wars and Sikh deeds of great heroism in battles like Saragarhi, had clearly tested the Sikh loyalty and commitment to the alliance.

The British valued the Sikh alliance and were careful to base it on full respect for Sikh tradition. However, it is also important to understand the nature of Sikh support for British rule in India. As later events showed, Sikh support for any *raj* (administration of any type) has never been unconditional. Here it is important to understand the Sikh concept of *miri-piri*.

*Miri* is about worldly affairs and includes all social, economic and political issues. *Piri* is about spiritual or religious matters only. Sikhism combines both into a way of thinking and a way of life. The Sikhs always regard themselves as independent regarding both aspects of life. When it comes to the affairs of the Sikh nation, the Khalsa Panth, they are never prepared to give up their freedom in both, worldly and spiritual matters. So, Sikh loyalty and Sikh acceptance of any rule is always conditional upon their *miri-piri* principle<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Lieut-Gen. Harwant Singh, *Sikh Review*, December, 1998 p. 36

<sup>22</sup> “The Sikh doctrine of Double Sovereignty [of *miri-piri*] .....has a curiously modern ring....a growing school of writers in Europe have tended to think on the lines in which it is grounded. The main substance of this



### 3 Recruitment drive for the War

Many Sikh battalions had been raised by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

When the recruitment drive in preparation for the first World War started, the Sikhs responded in large numbers. From 35,000 Sikh *jawans* at the beginning of the war in 1914, the number of Sikhs rose to well over 100,000 by the close of the war in 1918. With a Sikh population of less than 2%, they made up about 15 - 20% of the Indian army.

The Sikh states south of River Sutlej (cis-Sutlej states), which had retained their semi-independent status under the British Raj, made up some 60% of the Sikh battalions. These Sikh rajahs supported the war effort generously expecting good returns in future. The Sikh leaders were equally enthusiastic.

A new Sikh regiment, the 47<sup>th</sup> Sikh Regiment of the Bengal Infantry was raised in January 1901 at Sialkot (now in Pakistan). This regiment, later re-organised as the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Duke of Connaughts Own – DCO) in 1922, has a most remarkable history of action in many countries.

Many Sikh battalions were attached to non-Sikh regiments and brigades. Often military records, war photographs, video newsreels and even history books lost the Sikh identity in general descriptions like “Indian sepoy” when, in fact, they were writing about or showing Sikh *jawans* in action. For other background political reasons, Sikh identity and great contribution to the war effort was gradually lost in such generalised descriptions<sup>23</sup>.

### 4 Ranks in the Indian Army: Commissioned and non-commissioned officers

Until the last year of the First World War, all the commissioned officers of the Indian army were British. Although the Indians numbered twice the British forces, they could not receive the King’s Commission. Commission indicates grant of certain power or authority to do a certain duty. A commissioned officer in the forces holds the King’s (or these days, the Queen’s) commission and ranks second lieutenant, or its equivalent or above. Subedar and Jamadar were the first commissioned officer ranks for Indian officers. Havildar, equivalent to a sergeant, was the senior non-commissioned rank.

Only ten places per year were provided for Indian candidates at Sandhurst from 1918. This number doubled by about 1930. Further opportunities for Indian officer training opened up later at Woolwich (for Gunner and Sapper officers), at Cramwell for airmen, and in India at the Military College at Dehra Dun.

In the private armies of the Maharajahs there were, of course, senior ranking officers.

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doctrine is that any sovereign state which includes Sikh populations and groups as citizens must never make the paranoic pretensions of almighty absolutism, entailing the concept of total power, entitled to rule over the bodies and minds of men.....Any state which lays such claims, qua the Sikhs, shall automatically forfeit its moral right to demand allegiance of the Sikhs...” Kapur Singh, *The Golden Temple: Its Theo-political Status*, *The Sikh Review*, August 1974 p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> In researching war records for the Sikh role, this trend is most noticeable. It is much easier to trace Sikh military contribution to the First World War than the Second World War. This was not entirely due to the increase in the number of mixed army units in the Indian army. In the struggle to free India from British rule, the Sikhs were beginning to take a lead role at some cost to their independent national and religious identity. They paid a heavy price during the partition of India and have continued to do so in India after independence.

## 5 British Indian Army officers

The pre-war Indian Army officers came from the best in the UK and there was great competition for service with the Indian Army. For example in 1907, Bernard Montgomery (later Field Marshall Viscount Montgomery) missed selection. Those selected were keen to join the prestigious Sikh Regiment in the Indian Army. Brigadier Sir John Smyth, VC, got his first choice, the Sikh Regiment, only because one of the officers in the 15<sup>th</sup> Sikhs died in 1913<sup>24</sup>!

## 6 Royal visits before the War

The Prince and the Princes of Wales (the future King George V and Queen Mary) visited Amritsar during their Indian tour of 1905-6. They were received by the Sikhs of Panjab with great enthusiasm.

There was a grand *darbar* at Delhi when King George V (Emperor of India) in December, 1911. The climax was when the Jullundur Brigade with its three battalions, 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs, 59<sup>th</sup> Scinde Rifles and 1<sup>st</sup> Manchester's marched past in salute.

## 7. Pre-War growth of Sikh religious and educational institutions under the British

### 7.1 Sikh literature and education

The annexation of Panjab and the collapse of the Khalsa Raj had an immediate impact on the Sikhs as a community. During the Khalsa Raj, thousands had converted to Sikhism and swelled the ranks of the Khalsa army. Some famous Sikh generals of Khalsa Raj like Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa were amongst these converts. However, many who had converted to Sikhism for a good life in the Khalsa Raj, soon slipped back into their old Hindu sects.

Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Sikh recruitment to the British army, and the special recognition and privileges which Sikhs started enjoying in British Raj, reversed the trend to some extent. Western scholars wrote books about the great Sikh religious and historical heritage. Some of these books, which praised the Sikhs and, at times, criticised the British policy in India, were not liked by the British rulers of India. However, after the Indian Mutiny, the British attitude changed. Sikh scholars increasingly came into contact with western scholars and started reforms to ensure survival of Sikhism as a distinct religion. Directly or indirectly, the British influence did help the Sikh cause. A well organised Sikh reform movement, the Sri Guru Singh Sabha, held its first meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1873 in front of the *Sikh miri-piri* (political and religious) centre of Akal Takht, at Amritsar. That date may be regarded as the turning point for the Sikhs and the beginning of modern Sikh history.

Panjabi language in Gurmukhi script (in which Panjabi and Sikh holy Book, Guru Granth Sahib is written) was officially recognised and taught by the Panjab university<sup>25</sup>. The government supported the opening of a Sikh college. The foundation stone of this first great Sikh literary institution, the Khalsa College Amritsar, was laid by Sir James Lyall, Lt-Governor of the Punjab on 5<sup>th</sup> March, 1892. The Sikh Maharajahs of Patiala, Nabha and

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<sup>24</sup> Schlaefli Robin. *Emergency Sahib: Of Queen's, Sikhs and The Dagger Division*.

<sup>25</sup> "Dr Leitner was convinced [when Sardar Attar Singh of Bhadaur presented him with a list of 380 books in Panjabj] and he not only introduced Punjabi as a subject in the Oriental College but also got it introduced in the Panjab University..." *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*., Punjabi University Patiala.

Kapurthala contributed generously. The college is famous for its magnificent buildings and rich cultural heritage.

Stress on Sikh religious discipline in the British Indian Army further revived interest in Sikh religion. Most Sikh *javans* were recruited from the villages of Panjab. These *javans* returned home on leave looking distinct and smart in their army uniforms and full Sikh identity. They became the role models for the Sikh youth in Panjab.

As many times before in its eventful history, the Khalsa nation so close to extinction after the annexation of Panjab, was revived to make history in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and beyond. However, neither the Indian historians nor Indian politicians forgave the British for their role in promoting the distinct Sikh religious and cultural identity. They have preferred to attribute the Sikh revival to the British “divide and rule” policy in India!

## **7.2 Promotion of Sikh religious tradition in the Sikh regiments**

The British promoted the Sikh religious traditions in the army. An order issued by the Governor-General of India read, “...all Sikhs entering the British Army should receive Pahul [Sikh initiation] and observe strictly the code of Sikh conduct.” From the army view-point, there was a good reason for this. Lt Gen. Sir George MacMunn wrote, “A Sikh is baptised into his sect and not born into it, so that no man is a Sikh till he has taken the pahul....as the value of the Sikh as the simple faithful soldier, has lain in his adherence to the simple tenets and hardy life of his forebears, no non-baptised Sikh is admitted into a regiment of the Indian Army.” However, this policy worked to the advantage of the Sikhs also. The numbers of practising Sikhs had fallen sharply after the fall of the Sikh empire in northern India by 1849. Due to the privileges given to the Sikhs in the army and other services, this number started rising rapidly by the turn of the Century.

## **8. The First World War**

Germany invaded Belgium on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914. This was the start of the First World War. The huge Indian Army, spearheaded by Sikh units of proven quality and loyalty during the Indian Mutiny, the Burmese and North-West Frontier campaigns, provided the British Empire with a force which was “always ready, and of admirable efficiency and of assured valour”.

The British Indian Army had three functions: the preservation of internal peace in the sub-continent of India, the defence of Indian borders, and to serve anywhere in the British Empire outside the Indian sub-continent. For understanding the Sikh military contribution to the war effort in the First World Wars, it would be useful to trace the history of a typical Sikh army unit raised in 1901.

### **8.1 The 47<sup>th</sup> (Sikh) Regiment or the XLVII (D.C.O.) Sikhs**

The 47<sup>th</sup> (Sikh) Regiment<sup>26</sup> of the Bengal Infantry was raised at Sialkot in Panjab (now the part of Panjab in Pakistan) on 21 January, 1901.

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<sup>26</sup> Although, the modern regiments are made up of two or more battalions, some earlier regiments e.g. the 14<sup>th</sup> (Sikhs) Regiment of the Bengal Infantry, known as the Ferozepore Sikhs, were single-battalion regiments consisting of about 700 men. A battalion normally has five companies (each company has about 140 men under the command of a Captain).

One hundred trained jawans were supplied by 35<sup>th</sup> Sikhs and 36<sup>th</sup> Sikhs regiments.

Four Jemadar commissions were sanctioned by the Government of India for “Native Gentlemen of good family”. (Jemadar rank is equivalent to sergeant in the British army.)

The first Commanding Officer was Lieutenant Colonel P G Walker from the 20<sup>th</sup> Punjab Infantry. The first Subedar Major (sergeant major, the highest rank allowed for Sikhs and Indians) of the Battalion was Waryam Singh from (The Queens Own) Corps of Guides. It is interesting to note the direct appointment of Jemadar Thakur Singh, whose grandfather had served in the Khalsa army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He rose to the rank of Major when he retired in 1924.

The Regimental crest represented a plain Sikh Quoit (symbolising the steel “chakkar”<sup>27</sup>) in which was the Sikh Lion, under which were the words “XLVII Sikhs”. There was an Imperial Crown on the top of the quoit.

In the earlier days, the Sikh soldiers wore a massive turban 10 yards long for protection. This length was reduced to 5 yards in October 1903.

47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs were presented with their first Colours (the identifying flag or banner of a military unit) by Lieutenant General Sir Bindoon Blood, KCB, General Officer Commanding Punjab Force. The traditional “Bengal Infantry” part of the description was dropped after 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1903.

On 13 June 1904, the 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs was ordered to do service in North China as part of an allied force to restore order following the Boxer rebellion<sup>28</sup>. The rebellion was crushed and the Indian Army was stationed there to maintain peace. The Regiment stayed in China at Tientsen and Lutai, for three years from early May 1905 to April, 1908. It fought hard to maintain law and order in the area. So impressed was the Brigadier General W H Walters, Commander of North China Force that he was moved to say at the farewell “.....you cannot be surpassed by any unit of His Majesty’s Army.” The German Field Marshall von Waldersee reviewed the Sikhs at Shanghai and greatly admired their physique and military bearing. Little was he to know at the time that six years later the same 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs would beat the best of the German soldiers opposite them in France.

The 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs and one of the original regiments, 15<sup>th</sup> Sikhs (the Ludhiana Sikhs) were attached to the 8<sup>th</sup> Jullundur Brigade (stationed at Jullundur in Panjab) when the First World War started on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914. The Regiment joined the Indian Expeditionary Force for service abroad and boarded a ship from Karachi on 28 August, 1914. The British forces (called the British Expeditionary Force) had suffered heavy losses in France. On 27<sup>th</sup> September, the Indian forces named the “Indian Corps”, including Sikh regiments, landed at Marseilles in France. On arrival huge crowds were waiting. “First came a detachment of Sikhs, for the greater part head and shoulders above the spectators [general impression of tall Sikh *jawans* of the Indian Army wearing their neat Sikh-style turbans]. They received the plaudits of the crowd with the imperturbable smiling composure of their race.”

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<sup>27</sup> The author has seen in childhood the deadly accuracy with which the Nihangs (Akalis) could throw the chakkar to slice off the top of melons placed on the top of posts.

<sup>28</sup> The aim of this peasant rebellion was to drive out all foreigners from China. Boxer was the name given to a Chinese secret society and Boxer bands went about attacking all foreigners killing Europeans, Christian missionaries and Chinese converts. So a combined allied force was put together to restore order.

From 21<sup>st</sup> October, 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs took part in battles named after villages Ypres and Neuve Chapelle. On 28<sup>th</sup> October the Regiment fought a memorable battle at Neuve Chapelle They fought against crack German and Bavarian Regiments in one of which was Corporal Adolf Hitler! They proved their superior battle skills in hand to hand fighting with the Germans who had greater numbers and more machine guns. The official historian wrote, “The History of the Indian Army contains few nobler pages than that of the 28<sup>th</sup> October, 1914”. The newspapers in England showed pictures of Sikh troops and wrote about their great bravery. Journalists wrote, perhaps with some exaggeration, that they were proving irresistible and slaughtering Germans like sheep!”<sup>29</sup>.

Sir James Wilcocks sent the following message to the Commanding Officer:

“I am glad to hear how splendidly the 47<sup>th</sup> fought at Neuve Chapelle. I feel quite sure it will keep high the name of the Sikh in this War, and will answer every call of duty.”

The British military historian wrote about those two critical months of October and November, 1914, “While it was perhaps hyperbole to say that the Indian troops (particularly the Jullundur Brigade) had saved the Empire, it was certainly true that they had saved the British Expeditionary force.”<sup>30</sup>

The 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs remained at the frontline for 13 months taking part in further battles. The Sikh regiments fought many battles in France besides Ypres and Neuve Chapelle. At Flanders (now divided between Belgium and France) and Ieper (Belgium) they held out against far greater odds.

One example of the daring of the Sikhs is given as follows:

“On the night of 27/28<sup>th</sup> [November, 1914] Havildar Lachman Singh and Sepoy Rur Singh crawled out to obtain information as to the suspected sap [covered enemy trench tunnel nearby] of the enemy. The two men approached the sap very closely, but were discovered and heavily fired upon, Sepoy Rur Singh was hit and Lachman Singh dragged him back to the trenches. He then found that Rur Singh’s rifle had been left behind and before he could be stopped went back and brought it in despite the heavy fire assisted by Verey lights, that the Germans were maintaining.” Loss of a rifle was regarded as loss of honour by the Sikh jawans. Havildar Lachman Singh was awarded the Order of Merit. During most of these operations the 15<sup>th</sup> Sikhs was close by.

The 47<sup>th</sup> left France on 17<sup>th</sup> December, 1915. The Sikhs had suffered heavy casualties but were in good spirits having been up against the best in the field.

Military history records show that they stopped the first assault by the Germans in First World War which allowed the Western forces time to re-group. Thousands of Sikh *jawans* from famous Sikh regiments gave their lives in many crucial battles on the Western Front at the start of the War:

“Samadh [memorial stone etc. to remember the dead] of Sardar Kishan Singh at Bedford House Cemetery, Ieper, where “IK OM KAR, SRI WAHEGURU JI KI FATEH, SAKARE GAYE<sup>31</sup>” etc. is engraved. Such text is engraved on every Sikh soldier’s Samadh throughout

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<sup>29</sup> Khana P. K. Maj. Gen. & Pushpinder S Chopra. *Portrait of Courage*

<sup>30</sup> Khana and Chopra, *Portrait of Courage* p.8

<sup>31</sup> The words mean: “There is One Creator to Whom belongs the victory”. The Sikh name for God is “Waheguru” meaning “The Wonderful Giver of Knowledge”.

Europe who has given his life for the freedom of mankind.....Here Kishan Singh with many unknown Sikh soldiers was cremated on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1915 in the second battle of Ieper” Chain Singh, writing from Holland (he also sent pictures with captions) to Sikh Review, March 2001, p.52.

The next wartime destination for the 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs was Mesopotamia (part of Iraq). They reached there on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1916 and joined other Sikh units like the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs in the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade (the Jullundur Brigade). There was much heavy fighting against heavily defended Turkish position on river Tigris. Casualties were heavy but the Sikh battalions gave an excellent account of themselves. The 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs were praised for their gallantry. General Keary, G.O.C. 3<sup>rd</sup> Division wrote to the Commanding Officer of 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs:

“I wish to put on record my very high appreciation of the conduct of your Battalion in common with the other Battalions of the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade at the action of 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1916. The attack on Dujailah was most gallantly carried out and its capture was a notable achievement.”

The units were involved in many battles in Mesopotamia until the Turks were in full retreat by November 1917. The Battle of Tekrit on the river Euphrates front was memorable where the Turkish force surrendered on 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1917. There were many other Sikh units at this front e.g. the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 51<sup>st</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> Sikhs, and 34<sup>th</sup> Sikh Pioneers.

47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs left for Palestine on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1918 having suffered heavy casualties in Mesopotamia. There were times when the troops were ordered to attack heavily defended positions. On occasions when positions were captured there was, unfortunately, a lack of backup support.

## **8.2 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs**

There are many accounts of remarkable bravery shown by the Sikhs. At the Third Battle of Krithia, at Gallipoli (Turkey) on 4<sup>th</sup> June, 1915 the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs fought gallantly alongside Australians and New Zealanders. The British troops suffered 4,500 casualties out of 16,000 who took part in the battle.

“The fate of the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs on the right must be described in greater detail...The two British officers were killed, within a few minutes; the double-company nevertheless succeeded in forcing its way across an intact wire obstacle and in capturing a trench in the ravine. Wonderful resolution was displayed. At one spot where heavy losses were being suffered whilst the men were trying to cut their way through wire, Havildar Maghar Singh suddenly leapt the obstacle as if it were a hurdle and was followed immediately by his section.” Although, the Sikhs suffered heavy casualties, Havildar Maghar Singh survived to be awarded the Order of British India.<sup>32</sup>”

## **8.3 When the Sikhs fought alongside Kiwis and Aussies**

Some passages from an article of Sunday, April 25, 2010, by Dev Nadkarni in the “Indian Weekender – Pulse of the Kiwi Indian Community” are given below how 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs fought side by side with Australian and New Zealand troops.

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<sup>32</sup> Talbot Colonel F. E. G., *The 14<sup>th</sup> King Georges Own Sikhs*, p.126.

“Few of us Kiwi Indians – especially of the younger generation – know that the spirit of Anzac Day, which has such solemn significance to New Zealanders and Australians, has a deep Indian connection.

“Anzac Day, which was observed last Saturday, as we all know is observed to perpetuate the memory of over 8,000 Australians and nearly 3,000 New Zealanders who laid down their lives fighting for the British Empire on the Gallipoli Peninsula in the course of World War-I.

“The Gallipoli campaign resonated profoundly among all nations involved. For New Zealand and Australia, the campaign was the first major battle undertaken by a joint military formation, the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC), and is often considered to mark the birth of national consciousness in both of these countries.

Records tell us that 371 of the Indians who died fighting at Gallipoli were from the battalion of the 14th Sikh regiment on June 3 and 4 1915.”

The article also quotes General Sir Ian Hamilton was in charge of the troops against the Turks during that operation and he wrote glowingly of this regiment that fought valiantly.

In a letter to his Commander-in-Chief back in India, he wrote: “In spite of the tremendous losses there was not a sign of wavering all day. Not an inch of ground was given up and not a single straggler came back.

“The ends of the enemy’s trenches were found to be blocked with the bodies of Sikhs and of the enemy who died fighting at close quarters, and the glacial slope was thickly dotted with the bodies of these fine soldiers all lying on their faces as they fell in their steady advance on the enemy.

“The history of Sikhs affords many instances of their value as soldiers, but it may be safely asserted that nothing finer than the grim valour and steady discipline displayed by them on the 4th of June has ever been done by soldiers of the Khalsa.

“Their devotion to duty and their splendid loyalty to their orders and to their leaders make a record their nation should look upon with pride for many generations.” (General Sir Ian Hamilton)

One account of a battle towards the end of the War on 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1918, is as follows:

Just before the end of the War, the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs were ordered to attack a heavily defended Turkish position on the banks of the river Tigris in Mesopotamia. With their traditional courage, the Sikh *jawans* charged into heavy artillery and machine-gun fire. Sixty-five of them were killed and 247 wounded in that action. These casualties represented 38% of those involved in the attack and all were incurred in one hour between 6.30 and 7.30 in the morning<sup>33</sup>.

The same Battalion (renamed 1/11 Sikhs) was later involved in Indian North-West Frontier operations.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid p.78.

#### **8.4. Rest leave between battles**

Between the battles, the Sikh *jawans* rested and performed religious duties. Camps were sometimes pitched in the desert. Religious discipline was strict. They read from the Sikh holy Book, Guru Granth Sahib and also sang religious hymns. Much attention was paid to physical cleanliness, health and training. They took part in games with other units. The Sikh *jawans* excelled in war games including bayonet attack, assault and team racing. The game of hockey had been introduced in the Indian army before the War and Sikhs became highly proficient at this game. Even today Sikhs are well-known for their prowess in field hockey. They also held athletic sports, tug-o-war and quoit throwing.

The Sikh maharajas supported the war effort wholeheartedly. The Sikh regiments of the Sikh princedoms were serving with the Indian Army. The leading figure amongst these was the Sikh Maharajah of Patiala who visited the front at Palestine on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1918 and met *jawans* of the Sikh units.

#### **8.5 Deployment of Sikh and other Indian battalions during the Wars**

The following note shows the unsatisfactory manner in which parts of Indian battalions and regiments were deployed to serve with other Divisions and Brigades during the First World War:

“On 29<sup>th</sup> October 1914, General Willcocks wrote in his diary:

*“Where is my Lahore Division? Sirhind Brigade: left in Egypt, Ferozopore Brigade: somewhere in the north, divided in three or four pieces, Jullundur Brigade: the Manchesters in the south with the 5<sup>th</sup> division, the 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs half with the one or the other British division, for the other half somewhere else. The 59<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Sikhs: in the trenches...”*

It is clear that this was not really favourable for the morale of the Indian rank and file. Thousands of miles away from home, in completely different surroundings, and inadequately adapted to the dreadful weather conditions, the Indian troops fought for a cause they hardly understood. I have already emphasised the particular relationship between the British officers and their Indian rank and file. When a lot of these officers died in the first fights, many Indian soldiers felt dazed and left alone without those officers who understood them and knew their culture, their habits etc. Indian companies, of which the commanding officer was lost, were brought under command of British units where no one understood them.” [Source of this note not known]

#### **8.6 The end of the War**

At about this time Turkish deserters started arriving and the end of the War was in sight. Following the battle of Megiddo in Palestine towards end September the Turks were in full retreat to Damascus and 47<sup>th</sup> Sikh with the other units continued their advance in pursuit. Turkey surrendered on 30 October, 1918 and Armistice between the Allies and Germany was concluded on 11<sup>th</sup> November, 1918.

The Farewell Order of 5<sup>th</sup> December, 1919, to the Jullundur Brigade by Brigadier General S. M. Edwardes, reads, “You left India at the very beginning of the War, in August 1914 as the “Jullundur Brigade”, and you three battalions have fought side by side in France, Mesopotamia and Palestine, to the end of the War. It is an unique record of which you must be justly proud.” The three battalions which had fought together throughout the Great War



were the 1<sup>st</sup> Manchester (English), 59<sup>th</sup> Rifles (Pathan) and 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs.” The three battalions exchanged trophies to remember their friendship. The three trophies are now proudly displayed by the three battalions now part of the British, Pakistan and Indian Armies respectively.

While the above account of the First World War is mostly of one Sikh Battalion, other famous Sikh regiments served with distinction in Europe, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Gallipoli (Turkey) and other fronts. Nearly 60,000 Indian soldiers died fighting in the War<sup>34</sup>. As the Sikhs were in the forefront in most campaigns, a very large proportion of those who died were Sikh *jawans*. Tactical errors by commanders may have been made e.g. in Mesopotamia in 1915, where heavy casualties were incurred without proper backup support. But charges by some Indian writers that, “Indian troops were used as cannon fodder.” are unjust. British troops were fighting side by side with Indian troops and suffered as many, if not more casualties.

The British policy towards the Sikhs, the privileges given to the Sikhs and full trust in their loyalty to the King and the Empire paid off during the First World War. Of the 22 Military Crosses awarded for conspicuous gallantry to the whole British Indian Army, the Sikhs won 14. One estimate is that the Sikhs contributed ten times more in men and material to the war effort than any other community of India<sup>35</sup>. The Sikhs were by that time regarded as the backbone of the Indian Army and the British Empire.

After the World War five Indian officers were especially selected to be given the King’s Commission. Two of these officers, Thakur Singh M.C. and Mit Singh M.C. were from the 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs i.e. the XLVII (Duke of Connaught) Sikhs.

The Sikhs were also taken in large number into the police and other services in India and in many South-east Asian and East African countries. These Sikh servicemen took their families and their religious practices to these countries. For example, many of the first Sikh Gurdwaras in Malaya (now Malaysia) were built by those in the army or the police.

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<sup>34</sup> Bose, Sugata & Jalal, Ayesha, *Modern South Asia – History, Culture, Political Economy*

<sup>35</sup> Sir John Maynard.

## **PART IV      BETWEEN THE WARS**

### **1      Early Sikh resistance to British colonial rule**

#### **1.1      First independence movement in India**

Despite good Anglo-Sikh relations, a series of incidents kept reminding the freedom loving Sikhs that they were not free under the British colonial rule. The freedom movement in Panjab had in fact started as soon as Panjab was annexed in 1849. This picked up at national

level towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when the Indian National Congress party was formed in 1885.

The Sikh writers, preachers and poets had not forgotten, nor were they going to let the people of Panjab forget, the loss of their Panjabi Khalsa Raj. In addition to Panjabi writers and poets, many western scholars like J. D. Cunningham and M. A. Macauliffe had also produced authentic literature (based on original Sikh scriptures) on Sikh ideology and tradition. Interaction between Sikh and western scholars introduced western concepts of democracy, nationalism and patriotism. The British privileges and army discipline (which recognised the Sikh way of life) too helped the Sikhs to retain pride in their separate ideological identity. Their fiercely independent spirit was kept alive by the Akalis or Nihangs who had lost most privileges as champions of the Khalsa tradition<sup>36</sup>.

**However, it was a soldier in the Khalsa army of Panjab who first resolved to fight against foreign rule following the annexation of Panjab. This man was Baba Ram Singh (1816 – 1885). His followers later became known as the *Namdhari* Sikhs. To them he became a guru in later life (when he was in British prison at Rangoon) and the *Namdhari* sect became an offshoot of mainstream Sikhism. His stress was on simple living, regular meditation on *Naam* (God’s Name) and boycott of all foreign goods and services. His method of fighting foreign rule was effective and later adopted by the Indian national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi<sup>37</sup>.**

At the height of the *Namdhari* revolt, 68 *Namdhari* Sikhs were tied to cannon and publicly blown to death without trial in 1872. Baba Ram Singh was exiled to Rangoon in Burma where he died after 13 years. Unlike the Indian Mutiny, this was the start of the first true freedom movement in India, which, in due course, did manage to secure independence for India in 1947.

The Sikhs had not forgotten the conversion to Christianity and deportation of their last ruler, young Maharaja Dalip Singh to England. They have still not forgotten the manner in which he had been deprived of the world famous diamond, the *Koh-e-Noor* (which now adorns the Royal crown). Panjabi bards like Shah Mohammad and Sikh *dhadis* wrote and sang the glory of the Khalsa Raj, the treachery of the *farangi* and mourned the sad plight of the young Maharajah and his mother Maharani Jindan. The Maharani died at Kensington, London on 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1863. The Maharaja converted back to Sikhism, got in touch with some leading Sikhs and tried desperately to regain his kingdom without success. He died a lonely and sick man in Paris on 22 October, 1893.

The British rulers of India kept a watchful eye on Sikh activities for good reasons but perhaps overreacted sometimes to the Sikh political revival. However, generally they relied on the Sikhs of Panjab to support them. The Sikhs too had become comfortable with their position as the most privileged community in the Raj.

## 1.2 Socialist influence: The *Ghadar* (Revolution) Party

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<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, even in the days of British Raj these fierce Akalis were allowed to travel free on trains and they would stop vehicles on the road to hitch a ride. They continued to enjoy the freedom of the countryside for grazing their horses and cattle and were usually received with respect and awe as the “Khalsa fauj” (Khalsa army) by simple village people. They were always given free food by the villagers and when they arrived in groups called “jathas”.

<sup>37</sup> Indian Congress had close connection with the *Namdharis*. At least one very important meeting of Indian National Congress leaders took place at the *Namdharis* centre at Bhaini Sahib. The shed-like building where it took place is still preserved.

In 1913, the *Ghadar Party* was formed by emigrants in the United States. It called for a mass revolt against the British rule in India. Sikhs living abroad resented the prejudicial treatment they were receiving from their white neighbours. Their anger began to be directed towards the British colonial rule in India.

Most of the founders of the “Hindi Association” popularly known as the *Ghadar party* were Sikhs. Their president was Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna. Some of them returned to India at the beginning of the War and started their anti-British activities. There is little doubt that these revolutionary were influenced by socialist thought popular in western universities. The Kamagata Maru incident (see below) helped their plans. One such person was Kartar Singh Sarabha, an eighteen years old student at the University of California, Berkeley. He came to India and started inciting Indian soldiers to revolt. He was captured with others, tried at Lahore (1915-16), sentenced on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1915 and hanged three days later<sup>38</sup>.

### **1.3 Kamagatu Maru and the massacre at Budge Budge Ghat in Calcutta**

A Sikh businessman, Gurditt Singh, chartered a Japanese ship, Kamagata Maru, to transport Indians to Canada in defiance of anti-Indian discriminatory Canadian laws. In this ship, 376 Indians, mostly Sikhs reached Canada in May 1914. They were denied entry into Canada and the steamer was sent back in July. It was on high seas when the War broke out. No one was allowed to disembark before it reached Calcutta in eastern India. There, at the Budge Budge Ghat (harbour), when the passengers refused to be sent to Panjab, the troops opened fire and killed 19 of them. Groups of “Ghadarites” started arriving in India with their plans for a revolution. However, their attempts were not successful. By about the middle of 1915 any hope of a revolution was over<sup>39</sup>.

(See Appendix III for a fuller account of the “*Historical Episode of Komagata Maru during the Ghadar Movement*”)

### **1.4 Rakabganj Gurdwara incident**

The British rulers were increasingly becoming arrogant and careless in their treatment of local issues. In 1913, the outer wall of a historical Gurdwara (Sikh temple) was pulled down to build a road to the British Viceroy’s residence (the Viceregal Lodge). The Sikhs protested strongly but the First World War intervened. The matter was dropped to be taken up after the war.

### **1.5 Jallianwala Bagh massacre**

The real turning point in the Indian struggle for independence was the massacre at the Jallianwala Bagh at Amritsar, the holy city of the Sikhs. It was the Vaisakhi day on 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1919. Vaisakhi is celebrated as the anniversary of the confirmation of the Khalsa Panth, the Sikh nation, by the Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh in 1699. An open political meeting was to be held at the Jallianwala Bagh, adjoining the Golden Temple, Amritsar. The British rulers decided to teach a lesson to those talking about Indian freedom. With the approval of the Governor of Panjab, Sir Michael O’Dwyer, General Dyer<sup>40</sup> ordered a platoon to block the entrance of the Bagh (garden) and open fire on unarmed civilians. 379 died and over 2,000 were wounded by the time the firing stopped. This terrible massacre started an India-wide

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<sup>38</sup> Madra & Singh, *Warrior Saints*

<sup>39</sup> Grewal, J. S., *The Sikhs of Punjab*.

<sup>40</sup> Many mix up the names of these two leading figures in this terrible episode in Indian history.

protest against British rule. From then the Sikhs led the freedom struggle to a successful conclusion in 1947. On 13<sup>th</sup> March 1940, Sir Michael O'Dwyer was publicly shot in Caxton Hall at London by a Sikh, Udham Singh, who had witnessed the Jallianwala Bagh massacre as a young man. He had been influenced by leaders like Bhagat Singh, who was hanged on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 1931 for his revolutionary activities. Udham Singh was sentenced and hanged on 31<sup>st</sup> July, 1940.

Brutal repression followed the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. (It does seem strange indeed that not all the Sikhs condemned General Dyer, who ordered the shooting. In fact, at a later date, he was honoured by the head priest of Golden temple!)

## **1.6 Sikh *jawans* return home after the First World War in 1918.**

When the Sikh *jawans* returned home after the First World War, they realised that they were denied the freedom for which they had made such great sacrifices during the War<sup>41</sup>. New Sikh movements started. Some of these aimed to reform their own religious institutions and to free them from British control<sup>42</sup>. Others arose to oppose British colonial rule. British administrators of India were concerned; they had much experience of Sikh determination when they were fighting for a just cause. Sikhs suffered the consequences for their lead role in the freedom struggle by making over 80% of all sacrifices (hangings and life imprisonments resulting from the freedom movement). These sacrifices in the struggle for freedom were made by a community numbering less than 2% of the population of the sub-continent!

## **2. Sikh family life between the wars (1918 – 1939)**

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the prosperity brought by the British Raj was clearly visible in the form of railway and road networks, and a comprehensive system of irrigation canals in Panjab. These networks were further extended between the two World Wars. All Panjabis enjoyed this prosperity. In addition to farming, the Sikhs and the Panjabi Muslims were in the army in large numbers, while the Hindu castes reaped the benefits in trade, money-lending and services.

### **2.1 Life in the villages of Panjab**

The Sikhs of Panjab prospered between the wars. Most families, especially the farming families in the villages (the Jat Sikhs), had one or more family members in the British Indian Army. The old feudal system of giving *jagirs* (land grants for services provided), was revived in a more progressive way by the British. They allocated 25 to 55 acres to retired soldiers and 500 acres or more to officers who had served well. For example, the next of kin of the heroes of Saragarhi were each granted Rupees 500 (a significant sum those days) and 50 acres of land.

These allotments were made in the new canal colonies. New canals were dug with the help of the local labour force, and through these army allotments nearly 10 million acres of new land

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<sup>41</sup> Madra & Singh, *Warrior Saints*, p. 112

<sup>42</sup> The British rulers held the view that by controlling and keeping Sikh religious places under own supervision, they could keep an eye on any subversive activities. We need to remember that the *miri-piri* principle of Sikhism allows discussion of religious and political aspects of life at Sikh religious places.

was brought under cultivation by the 1920s<sup>43</sup>. By 1947 the land allotted to the retired *jawans* and officers was 14 million acres. With the partition of India in 1947, most of this land came in Pakistan. (The old Sikh army settlers, who had developed this land, were forced to migrate to the Indian side of Panjab as refugees in that year.)

Army promotions and honours together with civil honours and appointments boosted the morale of the Sikh community and strengthened Anglo-Sikh ties at non-political level.

So, between the two World Wars (1918 – 1939), the Panjabi Sikhs, together with other Panjabi communities prospered as farmers and as providers of services for agriculture. All were doing well: from the village carpenter who made the wooden and steel tipped ploughs to the bellied Bania, who lent money at high rates of interest or acted as the middle-man for selling grain from the rich Panjabi harvests.

In addition to the prosperity and security brought to the Panjabi life by British rule there was one other very important social consequence. While a significant number of young Sikhs were kept busy in the army in Barracks or on the North-West Frontiers campaigns, those who had retired from the well disciplined army life during the First World War were now family men. They brought social discipline and order in the villages.

Literacy amongst the farming families increased over the years. For the first time, Sikh literacy caught up with the other communities in India. “Increase in the number of Sikhs was generally attributed to the policy of the British to give preference to Sikhs in many branches of government service as well as in the army. However, only in 1911 were the Sikhs able to catch up with the Hindus in literacy...”<sup>44</sup>.

Communities lived side by side in peace in the villages while practising their own religions and creeds. They took part in each other’s festivals and celebrated these together. All celebrated when a village *jawan* returned home on leave or from a campaign possibly with an award for bravery and a promotion to “Jemadar” or “Havildar”. The villagers received the *jawan* warmly by putting garlands around his neck; the old mother and aunts touched his head with their palms while blessing him; the grey bearded father, and uncles (some retired army types themselves) stood around proudly while the young women glanced shyly at the hero from a distance. Many romantic Panjabi songs are about the *pardesi* (in this context a soldier or one working or serving away from home) returning home.

Some retired Sikh soldiers who had seen so much bloodshed during the war turned to religion for comfort and later some became great religious teachers themselves.

So, despite the occasional political disturbances which caught the headlines<sup>45</sup> and the marches and campaigns (the *morchas*) to free Sikh shrines from the British and the British sponsored hereditary priests called *mahants*<sup>46</sup>, the lot of most was not bad. It may even be argued, that

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<sup>43</sup> Singh, Patwant, *The Sikhs* Ch.5 pp. 179-180

<sup>44</sup> Grewal, J S, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>45</sup> So pre-occupied have been the historians with these headlines and how the sly Britishers exploited the naïve Sikhs, that they have mostly ignored the reality of Panjabi life during the British rule. Such has been this bias in reporting, that the role of the Sikhs at the centre stage during the two World Wars has not received much mention from Indian historiographers to date. It may even be argued that it was not the Sikh trust in the British, but more the Sikh trust in their own and Indian leadership, which was betrayed prior to the partition of the Indian sub-continent. That partition sliced Panjab in two depriving the Sikh of millions of acres of land, which they had developed with British and support.

<sup>46</sup> These *mahants*, although, originating from historical religious families, who had traditionally looked after many famous Sikh shrines, e.g. Nanakana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak, had sunk into immoral living.

the prosperity of the Panjabis, and the increasing number of Panjabi emigrants to western countries, were the main drivers behind the freedom struggle led by the Sikhs. The Sikhs continued to remain true allies of the British but their loyalty apparently did not stretch to the full and final acceptance of continued British rule in India.

## **2.2 Family life of Sikh army officers from upper social class – the *Sardar* families.**

In this section, it would be interesting to look at the lifestyle of one well to do military Sikh family through an European experience. In his book “*Emergency Sahib*”, Col. Robin Schlaefli writes:

“ Friendship with Khushalpal Singh [Captain, later major, in the British Indian Army before the Second World War] led to an unforgettable experience....he invited John Bagshawe....and me to stay at his home in Nabha, a small princely state bordering on Patiala in the Punjab....K. P’s father and uncle had both been to Oxford University...They lived in a large, flat roofed house in the country with a walled court-yard and garden, in which there was a small swimming pool....Dinner was a delightfully protracted affair. We all sat around a large table in a beautifully appointed dining room. In front of each of us was a silver tray, around the edge of which were arranged perhaps a dozen small matching bowls, each containing a different exotic-smelling offering of meat, vegetables and spices. The centre of the tray did not remain empty long. With the skill of a practised quoit thrower, the servant behind each chair, flicked a hot chapatti over his appointed master’s shoulder, to land it with a soft plop, slap in the bull’s eye. There were no knives, forks or spoons. K.P. gave us an encouraging grin as he tore a strip off his chapatti and dipped it into one of the bowls, capturing a steaming morsel before popping it into his mouth....we followed his example....Never before can I remember having tasted anything so delicious as those meals....Sikh women have equal status with men and are revered to the extent that, just as every male Sikh bears the name “Singh”, every female is entitled “Kaur”, meaning “Princess”.....A lovely, graceful lady, our hostess wore – in place of the Hindu sari – a long silk blouse over loose trousers caught at the ankle. A soft-hued diaphanous scarf was draped across her throat and thrown back over each shoulder. Bare brown feet were adorned with gold ankle bangles. ”

The same author talking about Sikh religious prohibitions, of which drinking is one, says: “Now the only one I know to have been overlooked as the years have worn on is the promise to be teetotal. Sikhs unashamedly enjoy a drink and make no secret of the fact. Indeed, the “Patiala peg” is reputed to be measured by two fingers from the bottom of a wide glass – the first and the fourth!”

Needless to say the rich landlords of Panjab, some serving as officers in the army towards the 1930’s, were having a good life, enjoying the best of eastern and western cultures.

## **2.3 The life-style of the Sikh Maharajahs**

The Sikh Maharajas of cis-Sutlej (south of river Sutlej) Sikh states of Patiala, Nabha, Jind and Faridkot, continued to play an important part in Sikh affairs until the partition of India in 1947. They were allowed to keep their own personal armies and were keen allies of the British rulers. In war time the Patiala Sikhs fought side by side with other famous Sikh regiments.

The Maharajas had great wealth and they lived lavishly. Maharaja of Patiala was one of the richest princes of India.

“Maharajah Bhupinder Singh had stocked his famous Moti Bagh Palace - built of pink sandstone and covering 11 acres of ground - with a fabulous collection of treasures from all over Europe as well as the East.... We were taken into room after room, each filled with priceless objects d’art in gold, silver, porcelain, ivory and exotic woods. There were marvellous collections of rubies, emeralds, and diamonds, some as larger than life single stones, others set in jewellery....”<sup>47</sup>.

It is not surprising that the Maharajahs were comfortable with the British Raj and supported the British wholeheartedly. Indeed, it was the Maharajah of Patiala who led the Sikh Defence League, formed to support the British war effort in the Second World War.

## **2.4 Re-organisation of the Indian Army**

A re-organisation of the Indian Army had taken place in 1922. The 11<sup>th</sup> Sikh Regiment was formed from the proud 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 36<sup>th</sup>, 45<sup>th</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs. Tradition is important in army units and despite new names the Battalions tended also to retain their old names e.g. the new 2<sup>nd</sup> Battallion of 11<sup>th</sup> Sikh Regiment would say that they were the 15<sup>th</sup> Ludhiana Sikhs formed in 1846. The 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Duke of Connaught’s Own – DCO) remained proud of their 47<sup>th</sup> Sikh origin. New battalions were raised. For example, a specialist battalion of the 11<sup>th</sup> Sikh Regiment, the Machine Gun Sikhs (MG Sikhs) was formed officially on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1942 from other battalions of the Regiment.<sup>48</sup>.

# **PART V THE SECOND WORLD WAR**

## **1 The Second World War**

On 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1939 Britain declared war on Germany. On the same day, India entered the Second World War, when the Viceroy of India, Lord Linlithgow, declared war against Germany on behalf of India. The Japanese attacked American naval base at Pearl Harbour on 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1941, and dragged the Americans into the War also. The Second World War truly became a war for human freedom. Compared with the (generally) liberal and progressive colonial rule of the British and other western countries, the fascist objectives and territorial

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<sup>47</sup> Schalaefli, Robin, *Emergency Sahib*

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



ambitions of the Axis powers<sup>49</sup> were frightening. Despite the struggle for freedom from British rule in India, the Sikh leadership soon realised this.

## 2 The Sikhs opt to support the War effort

Much had happened after the First World War. Sikh memories of Kamagata Maru, Jallianwala Bagh, the bitter struggle for Sikh control of their own shrines and Gurdwaras<sup>50</sup> and the hangings of many Sikh patriots like Kartar Singh Sarabha and Bhagat Singh, were still fresh in the Sikh minds. The influence of the Indian freedom movement led at national level by figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Subhash Chandra Bose<sup>51</sup> was strong. However, so far as the Sikhs were concerned, any uncertainty about supporting the British was removed as soon as the German and Japanese war aims became clearer. Once again, the Khalsa opted to oppose the fascist powers and to fight for the freedom of mankind.

Led by the Maharajah of Patiala, the Sikh leaders formed a Khalsa Defence League and started campaigning for Sikh recruitment to the army. The Sikhs joined the army by the thousand. The Indian Army increased from 189,000 before the start of the War to over 2.5 million by the end of the War. This was the world's biggest voluntary army. Over 300,000 Sikh served in the army during the six years of the War<sup>52</sup>. This army was equipped with modern weapons. Due to its location and vast resources, India became an important strategic base for the Allied powers<sup>53</sup>.

## 3 Early setbacks for the British

It is possible to explain the initial British setbacks in the Second World War. As an author noted:

“The very vastness of the British Empire had become her greatest weakness. Britain could not concentrate its full strength everywhere and on all fronts. Caught unprepared, she was quite conscious of her limitations and weaknesses. America had not yet entered the fray and Britain alone was carrying out a desperate struggle for her existence in Europe and North Africa.”<sup>54</sup>

In South-East Asia, British naval power was more than matched by the Japanese air force, which sunk battle ships, HMS “Prince of Wales” and “Repulse”, on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1941 within a matter of hours. These ships were the pride of the Royal Navy. It was not enough for Britannia to rule the waves.

The Imperial Japanese Navy attacked Pearl Harbour on 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1941. The Japanese drove the French out of Indochina, the Dutch out of Indonesia, the Americans out of Philippines, and the British were driven out of Hongkong, Burma, Singapore and Malaya (now Malaysia). In the meantime the Allies were suffering terrible losses on all fronts in Europe.

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<sup>49</sup> Alliance of Germany and Italy (1936) and later the Japanese and other countries who opposed the Allies in World War II.

<sup>50</sup> In five years of agitation for the control of their own sacred shrines (which resulted in the Gurdwara Act of 1925), over 30,000 men and women had gone to prison, nearly 400 killed and over 2,000 wounded. Sikh leaders were arrested and charged with, “conspiracy to overthrow British rule in order to set up a Sikh state.” Khushwant Singh, *The Sikhs today* p.54.

<sup>51</sup> Subhash Chandra Bose, hardly mentioned or remembered these days, was a very popular and leading Indian national leader before the Second World War. He became the President of the Indian National Congress in 1938, much to the annoyance of other older and moderate leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and his favourite Pundit Jawahar Lal Nehru, who later became the first Prime Minister of partitioned India in 1947.

<sup>52</sup> Madra & Singh, *Saint Warriors* p. 143.

<sup>53</sup> Singh, General Mohan, *Soldiers' Contribution to Indian Independence* p 222

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid* p.55.

The German and the Japanese armies seemed unstoppable. Sikh units fought some tough battles in Malaysia at the start of the Japanese invasion under hopeless conditions.

#### **4. Battle of Kampar (South of Ipoh, Perak State) .**

More information is needed about the “heavy casualties” inflicted on the Japanese advancing forces at Kampar by the 11th Division in the first week of January 1942. Earlier, the Division had been “badly defeated” at Gurun and had withdrawn to Kampar. Here the Division stood firm for a short period but “pressure on the flank from further enemy landings from the enemy made further withdrawal unavoidable....The aerodrome, however, was to be denied to the enemy until 5 January to prevent it being used by the Jap fighters for attack on a convoy that was due to arrive in Singapore any day.” The convoy did arrive safely.

#### **4 The bravery of a Sikh battalion in Malaya: The Battle of Niyor**

By January, 1942, British forces in Malaya were in full retreat before the massive onslaught of the Japanese on land and by air. However, on 25<sup>th</sup> January, 1942, the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment, fought the only tactical offensive against the invading Japanese at a place called Niyor near the Kluang airport in southern Malaya. The 5<sup>th</sup> Sikhs attacked a Japanese position while retreating to rejoin their Brigade.

“ “A” Company swept forward with tremendous dash with shout of “*Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal*” [the Sikh war cry], charging up the crest. This unnerved the Japs who hastily left their positions, some throwing their arms in an effort to escape while the rest were bayoneted....after securing the objective, the Sikhs continued to slaughter the enemy for a good fifteen minutes, firing on Japs at close range of 30 to 100 yards till the enemy had withdrawn behind cover and out of range after suffering heavy casualties....the bogey of the “super Japs” had been laid bare.”

In a subsidiary battle, “...a platoon of the Sikhs of D Coy charged with fixed bayonets in a furious counter attack. Then suddenly the noise died off and they could see some 20 Japanese lying dead in the open in front of them with the remainder scrambling back through the undergrowth..”<sup>55</sup>

The action at Niyor was mentioned by BBC News a few nights later. The Sikhs had shown that the Japanese were not invincible even at that early stage of the War when the British Army was being beaten back on most fronts. (A Japanese officer later reported over 400 bodies buried at Niyor<sup>56</sup>.) This action allowed two British Brigades to withdraw safely.

#### **5 The “Indian National Army” in Malaya<sup>57</sup>**

With the fall of Malaya (now Malaysia) and Singapore, many thousands of Indian troops became Japanese prisoners of war (POWs). A Sikh Major in the British Indian army, Mohan

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<sup>55</sup> Khana & Chopra, *Portrait of Courage*.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Sometimes those who did not toe Mahatma Gandhi’s line of peaceful resistance to the British rule and resorted to more violent methods, have been ignored, both by Indian and British historians. Amongst these were Subhash Chandra Bose of Bengal and General Mohan Singh of Panjab. Had history taken a different turn, they could have been the leaders of independent India. Subhash Chandra Bose, who was elected the President of the Indian National Congress in 1939, against Mahatma Gandhi’s favourites, was one of the most influential Indian leaders before the start of the Second World War. He was arrested by the British in July, 1940, but managed to escape to Germany.

Singh, whose unit along with other British troops, had been run over by the advancing Japanese in northern Malaysia, decided to join the Japanese to free India from British rule. The Japanese saw some propaganda advantage in this and allowed Mohan Singh with other like-minded Indian POW officers to raise an Indian army unit called the Indian National Army (INA) in December, 1941. Mohan Singh (known as “General” Mohan Singh thereafter) became the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the INA.

However, soon he realised that INA was to be no more than a puppet army of the Japanese; and that they had no intention of arming it fully or letting it take any lead role in any front-line operations, he attempted to dissolve the INA in December, 1942

He wrote, “The Japanese plans in those days were based upon the concept that India could be conquered easily more with political pressure than with military force. They were greatly encouraged by the enthusiasm shown by us in the formation the Indian National Army and the great upsurge of patriotic spirit displayed by the Indian National Army as a small military force, to use it as a decoy for propaganda, fifth column<sup>58</sup> duties and minor operations.”

General Mohan Singh was dismissed and pronounced, “guilty of a grave and unpardonable crime of suspecting and challenging the Japanese Government’s sincerity regarding India’s freedom...” However, his life was spared. He was arrested by the Japanese on 29<sup>th</sup> December, 1942 and placed in detention under heavy guard.

The INA was taken over by an Indian leader, Subash Chandra Bose (popularly called “Neta Ji”) who had escaped to Germany from his detention by the British in India. He was in Germany from 28<sup>th</sup> March, 1941 to 8<sup>th</sup> February, 1943. He met Hitler, (on 20<sup>th</sup> May, 1942) who was not too impressed by his plans to free India from British rule. However the Germans allowed him to raise an army unit of about 3,000 Indian POWs in Germany. Later he was sent on a submarine to Malaya, where he took over the INA leadership from 2<sup>nd</sup> July, 1943. He met General Mohan Singh only once in January 1944, when the latter was in Japanese detention. (Regrettably, the great contribution of General Mohan Singh to the independence of India by raising the Indian National Army in Malaya is hardly remembered by historians. I met him several times from 1973 onwards and he presented me with copy of his book, *Soldiers’ Contribution to Indian Independence*.)

The Japanese had absolutely no intention of handing over India to the Indians if they had won the war; and INA remained no more than an ill-equipped side show to impress the Indians. The INA was disbanded after the War and the soldiers returned home when the British were preparing to leave India in 1946. Nevertheless, “Neta Ji” Subhash Chandra Bose and General Mohan Singh, though nearly forgotten by historians, are remembered by the Indians as great freedom fighters.

## **6 Sikh Battalions and General Slim’s “forgotten army”**

In early 1944, the Japanese attacked India through Burma. As part of the Allied troops under Lord Mountbatten, the Sikh battalions fought vital battles of Imphal and Kohima in Assam. They fought with bayonets and hand to hand with a much larger Japanese force for over 50 days. “It was a dramatic scene amazingly still with a full moon high in the sky, as the Japanese were working their way forward through the jungle to the attack. The Sikhs held their fire till the Japanese were close up, and then gave a resounding “Jo bole so nihal, sat sri

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<sup>58</sup> A secret organisation working in enemy country to help an advancing army’s military aims.

akal!” [The victorious shout “The true Lord is eternal”] as they threw them back time after time.”<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the Japanese withdrew from Kohima. Their dreams of taking over India were shattered. The Sikhs won four Victoria Crosses and many battle honours in the Burma Campaign.

In 1944, Lord Mountbatten visited units of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army which was preparing for the final assault.

“ His talk to our Sikhs and PMs [Panjabi Muslims] at Nasik was short and to the point and in meticulously rehearsed Urdu. The Japs, he told them, were not invincible. Kohima and Imphal had proved that. They would soon be on the run.....He said that we were not the Forgotten Army<sup>60</sup>. We had never even been heard of! But we soon would be, because General Slim’s 14<sup>th</sup> Army was going to beat the Jap at his own game in the Burma jungle. Of that, there was no doubt.”<sup>61</sup>

In March, 1945, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army scored decisive victories in Central Burma.

The Sikhs repeated their feats of bravery of Imphal and Kohima at Mandalay in Burma:

“For six more days, the battle of Mandalay raged on. Our Sikhs distinguished themselves on a number of occasions. On Mandalay Hill, Havildar Anokh Singh dashed ahead of the attacking infantry with an armful of grenades. He was determined to overcome a party of Japs who were holding up the advance from the cover of an underground passage, and killed seven of them outright. Just after he had gleefully thrown his last grenade, a sniper shot him through the heart.”<sup>62</sup>

The history of the Royal Berkshire Regiment records yet another incident, which occurred on Mandalay Hill on 11<sup>th</sup> March, 1945:

“The mortar fire used against “Football” Pagoda contained a proportion of smoke bombs, which enabled the Sikhs to rush machineguns to the “Pavilion” roof to cover the advance of “D” Company. As the smoke lifted the Sikhs came under machine-gun fire from the roof of “Football” Pagoda, but they carried on their drill in superb fashion. When the number one gunner was killed, the command rang steadily out: “Fall out, number one! Carry on, number two! – and pushing his comrade aside, the new number one took his place and continued firing without interruption.”<sup>63</sup>

## **7 Deployment of Sikh army units**

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<sup>59</sup> Colonel F. T. Birdwood OBE, *The Sikh Regiment In The Second World War* quoted by Madra & Singh, *Saint Warriors* p.145

<sup>60</sup> General Sir William Slim was the commander of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, which carried out the final assault on the Japanese in Burma to give them a crushing defeat in 1945. He started training his army for this purpose in late 1943 when Lord Luis Mountbatten took over as the Supreme Allied Commander in south-east Asia. General Slims 14<sup>th</sup> Army was waiting to go into action.

<sup>61</sup> Schlaefli, *Emergency Sahib*.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

Like other “One class” Indian army units, Sikh regiments and battalions were often split to serve with different Brigades and Divisions. This was especially the case with specialised units. For example the Machine Gun Battalion of the 11<sup>th</sup> Sikh Regiment (The MG Sikhs) was split and attached to serve with other larger combat units just before the final assault on Burma in 1945: “Colonel Lerwill had now deployed “A” Company to be with 98<sup>th</sup> Brigade, “B” Company with the 62<sup>nd</sup> and “C” Company with the 64<sup>th</sup> , “D” Company in reserve with the Headquarters....”

## 8 Other theatres of war

India sent several army divisions to the Middle East at the start of the war.

We know from records that Sikh battalions, and *jawans* in mixed Indian Army units, served in Sicily and Italy, North Africa and the Middle East including Eritrea. For example, the famous 15<sup>th</sup> Sikhs (the old “Ludhiana Sikhs” raised in 1846) served with other Indian troops in Iraq, Persia [Iran], Egypt, Cyprus, Italy and Greece<sup>64</sup>. (Most of the Indian Prisoners of War (POWs) were located in Italy and Lybia. About 10,000 Indian POWs were in Germany at Annaberg Camp.<sup>65</sup>

[No Indian troops were involved in actions in France and Germany during the second world war. To recheck statement by Peter Boyden]

Although, Sikhs are mostly mentioned in the combat services on land, there were Sikhs serving with the air-force and the navy, and their names appear in the records and memorials of both these services. Sikh naval officers were serving on board many vessels. “During the First World War, one of the S Class destroyers built under the emergency war programme had been named “Sikh”. The ship was completed in 1918. In the Second World War a new class of destroyer was built for the Royal Navy. This “tribal” class included a new HMS Sikh. The HMS Sikh was sunk off Tobruk in the Mediterranean on September 14 1942.”<sup>66</sup>

## 9. End of World War II

World War II ended with the defeat of the Axis powers: Germany, Italy and Japan. The Allied powers, Britain and the Commonwealth countries, France, the USA, the USSR, and China, won at a great cost. An estimated 55 Million human beings lost their lives.

Human dignity, equality and freedom were given another chance.

End of World War II against Germany was officially declared on 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1945. Japan surrendered unconditionally on 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1945 and the World War II ended officially on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 1945.

In this fight for human freedom, the Sikh *jawans*, side by side with other nationalities, remained true to their warrior tradition:

*Death is a privilege for the brave, if they die for a noble cause*  
(First Guru, Nanak (1469 - 1539, *Guru Granth Sahib* p.579)

The cause was indeed noble and the Sikh *jawans* remained true to teachings of their Guru.

<sup>64</sup> Madra & Singh, *Warrior Saint*, p.90.

<sup>65</sup> Singh, General Mohan, *Soldiers' Contribution to Indian Independence*, pp. 226,227

<sup>66</sup> Madra & Singh, *Warrior Saint*, p.161.

“In the last two world wars 83,005 turban wearing Sikh soldiers were killed and 109,045 were wounded. They all died or were wounded for the freedom of Britain and the world, and during shell fire, with no other protection but the turban, the symbol of their faith.”<sup>67</sup>

(General, Sir Frank Messervy KCSI, KBE, CB, DSO of the British Army.)

## V BRITISH SIKHS: FROM TRUST-WORTHY ALLIES TO PROUD BRITONS

### 1. Partition of the Indian sub-continent

The freedom, the security, and the human dignity which the Sikh *jawans* had helped mankind to achieve at global level, was denied to them in their own homeland. Two years after the Second World War, the Indian sub-continent was partitioned and the Panjab divided between Pakistan and India. The following is an eyewitness account of a Sikh soldier in 1947, of those uprooted from their lands and homes to migrate from one part of Panjab to another:

“I saw terrible sights....the old too tired or ill to walk any further, had simply fallen on the dust and lay there under the merciless sun, streams of traffic would be held up by bullock carts that had stalled into ditches, and animals that refused to move any more. In that world of terror, panic and confusion, it was difficult to even fathom the extent of human tragedy. Civilisation seemed to have broken down.”

(From the diary of Brigadier Mohinder Singh Chopra, commanding the 123 Infantry Brigade at Amritsar.

Nearly two and half million Sikhs became homeless<sup>68</sup> following the independence of India (15<sup>th</sup> August 1945). Amongst these were the most prosperous farmers in India, of the “canal colonies” developed by ex-military Sikhs. Also, the ruling families were “eliminated as a political force”<sup>69</sup>. The partition of the Indian sub-continent was the final achievement of the Indian politicians who had been squabbling with each other along communal lines for the previous two decades.

The Sikhs of Panjab suffered the most. Yet, they had made the greatest sacrifice for the freedom of India and for the freedom of mankind compared with any other community in India<sup>70</sup>.

### 2 Sikh migration

By 1947, a large number of Sikhs were already settled in many counties like Malaya, East African countries, America and Canada<sup>71</sup>. There are indications that Sikhs started migrating abroad in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century following the Mughal persecution. But the main migrations resulted from Anglo-Sikh contacts in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Sikhs were admitted to the public services in the British colonies.

Young Sikhs from well- to-do families studied in the UK universities from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However, due to the need for cheap labour in the heavy industries in the UK,

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<sup>67</sup> The Sikh Regiment in The Second World War

<sup>68</sup> Singh, Khushwant, *The Sikhs Today*, p 58

<sup>69</sup> Ibid p. 58.

<sup>70</sup> Sir John Maynard quoted by Khushwant Singh in *The Sikhs Today*.

<sup>71</sup> One of the first accounts opened in a bank in Adelaide, South Australia, in 1848, is in the name of Kripo Singh, a shepherd!

hardy Sikh workers started migrating to the UK in the Nineteen-fifties. Shortages in medical, nursing and teaching staff resulted in a further wave of Sikh immigrants to the UK in the sixties. Ex-army personnel were also allowed entry to Britain in those days.

**By 1970, there was a significant Sikh community in the United Kingdom with Gurdwaras in the main UK cities.**

### **3 The British Sikhs today**

There are over 600,000 Sikhs in the United Kingdom today. Sikhism is taught as one of the six world religions in the religious education programme of British schools. *The Sikhs were recognised as a distinct racial group in the famous Mandla v. Lee<sup>72</sup> case: as having own religion<sup>73</sup>, and, distinct culture, tradition, language, literature and history.*

British Sikh are to be found in most professions and have done well in business and IT industries. As Prime Minister Tony Blair wrote, “Today, British Sikhs contribute a huge amount to the economy and to public life in the UK.”<sup>74</sup>

There is increasing recognition of the contribution of the Sikhs to the two World Wars.

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#### *Chardhi Kalla*

**(A gift of the Guru)**

This is a uniquely *Khalsa* concept and means the rising or positive spirit in even the most adverse circumstances. It has also to do with Sikh humour and may be best described in the words of Khushwant Singh:

“...The Nihangs [old style Akalis] have coined a vocabulary of their own, most of which traces back to their militant past and adversity in battle. An individual will refer to himself as *fauj* or an army. Large numbers of them have been reduced to beggary. But they do not “beg” for alms, they impose a “tax” and demand it of the people they visit. The poorest of food is given fancy names....When they want to urinate they ask “Can I frighten a cheetah?” A satisfactory performance at the lavatory is described as the “conquest of the great fort of Chittor”.

Jokes about the simple-mindedness of the Sikhs are largely made by the Sikhs themselves. “This attitude is born out of a sense of confidence that in any sphere of activity, physical or mental, in any profession, farming, soldiering, medicine, science or art, they can and do outsmart their sister communities...”

(Khushwant Singh, *The Sikhs Today* pp 94,95)

### **Army units and Indian Army ranks and British equivalents**

**(Tactical:** In military terms, the word “tactical” is used for limited, short term operations close to headquarters base. For example, a battalion made up of companies, platoons and

<sup>72</sup> Mandla v. Lee (1983) 1 All ER 1062 HL

<sup>73</sup> Sikhism is already recognised as one of the six major world religions.

<sup>74</sup> Letter of 1<sup>st</sup> November to Maharajah Duleep Singh Centenary Trust.

squads is a tactical unit. Unlike a Division, a Battalion cannot carry out prolonged operations on its own; these would require other types of support services in addition to combat troops. **Strategic operations** on the other hand are longer term in nature and require support services (auxiliary services) and a longer term plan.)

#### **Listed in order of size and importance:**

**Corps:** (Pronounced as kor) A separate branch of the armed forces having a specialised function; or, a tactical unit of ground combat forces consisting of two or more divisions with auxiliary service troops.

**Division:** The major independent administrative and tactical unit of an army capable of prolonged action in the field.

**Brigade:** Consists of a number of military units with supporting services. It is smaller than a division and is commanded by a Brigadier.

**Battalion:** A tactical military unit usually made up of one headquarters company and four infantry companies; or, in case of artillery, one headquarters battery and four artillery companies.

**Company:** A sub-division of a regiment or a battalion commanded by a captain.

**Platoon:** A subdivision of a company divided into squads or sections.

#### **Indian Army ranks below captain and their British equivalents**

**Subedar:** Junior Commissioned rank

**Jemadar:** Commissioned rank below subedar and equivalent to lieutenant

**Havildar:** Sergeant

**Lais Naik:** Lance corporal

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The Sikh Regiment.....

## **Annexes**

### **Annex I**

The First Anglo-Sikh War

A Book Review by Gurmukh Singh

February 24, 2011

([http://www.sikhchic.com/books/the\\_first\\_anglosikh\\_war](http://www.sikhchic.com/books/the_first_anglosikh_war))

THE FIRST ANGLO-SIKH WAR, by Amarpal Singh Sidhu. Amberley Publishing, U.K., 2010. Hardcover, pages: 320. ISBN-10: 1848689837, ISBN-13: 978-1848689831.

This is the first study of its type, which uses battlefield archaeology to give a graphic account of the battles fought during the First Anglo-Sikh War. The terrain and landmarks of each battlefield are described in detail "to give a comprehensive vision of the battlefield".

Satellite imagery from Google Earth has been used and there are many battlefield sketches and photographs.

This pioneering methodology also invites similar studies of other Punjab battlefields. As Prof. Peter Doyle writes in his foreword to this excellent book by Amarpal Singh Sidhu, "Battlefield archaeology has grown out of a need to reinterpret battlefields, to place them in their correct geographic setting, to understand the events that were played out in past wars ..." In addition to sources in the subcontinent, much new unpublished information, such as first hand accounts, maps and letters from that period and over the last 100 years has been included from U.K. sources such as the National Army Museum, British Library and a few other museums.

And so the reader is given a tour of each battlefield as he retraces the clash between two great armies from 18 December, 1845 to 10 February, 1846. The stakes were high: loss of sovereignty for the Sikh kingdom, or the end of colonial rule in India.

There are many well researched books written in recent years of the chaotic period after Maharaja Ranjit Singh's death on 27 June, 1839 and the two Anglo-Sikh Wars ending in the annexation of Punjab by the British in 1849.

However, my question, "Why yet another book?", is answered by the author in his preface: "Appreciation of the battlefields is important. No other single event can decide the fate of countries and nations in more dramatic fashion than a trial of strength over a few square kilometres of often uncompromising land. Few other events are more galling than the loss of independence suffered after a defeat. On the battlefield are displayed the highest human qualities of bravery, camaraderie and loyalty, and also the basest vices of treachery and cowardice."

In the introductory pages, the author done a concise analysis of the events which led to the First Anglo-Sikh War and the battles of Mudki, Ferozeshah, Bhudowal, Aliwal and the "slaughter" of the retreating Sikh army at Sabraon.

A clash between the two great armies in Punjab in the first half of the 19th century, was inevitable. The British colonial administrators and generals were waiting for the right opportunity but, for reasons discussed, they were in no hurry.

"The pact of 1809 proved useful to the British because the powerful Sikh army was controlling the turbulent tribesmen in the north and west, while British rule was over the more placid states". Therefore, "the Sikh empire provided security for the territories of the East India Company at no cost to the company itself."

Meanwhile, the Sikh army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's kingdom, north of Sutlej River, was not quite ready to take on a well disciplined colonial force maintained entirely at the expense of the subdued rulers of India through the devise of "Subsidiary Alliance".

In fact, until Maharaja Ranjit Singh's death, the waiting game was of mutual benefit to both sides.

The intrigue and treachery at the Lahore Darbar by the Hindi Dogras, following the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and the subsequent loss of control over the Sikh soldiery, changed the mutual benefit equation. By 1845, the clash between the British Raj and the Khalsa Raj, which was inevitable, became imminent.

Following years of strife at Lahore after Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Sikh generals had lost control over the army which elected "panchayats" and held ultimate power. The soldiers

"went on vendettas or carried out looting", and remained away from cantonments without leave for long periods. Taxes could not be collected and the treasury was empty.

The British too were getting regular reports of the events at Lahore and continued to make necessary preparations; e.g., 60 iron boats were constructed at Bombay and brought to Khunda ghat near Ferozepore, so that these could be used to construct a double bridge across Sutlej when required.

In March 1845, Gulab Singh (influential at Lahore) had already secretly written to the British Governor General, asking him to invade Punjab. "This would not be a war of conquest, however, but one organised specifically to annihilate the recalcitrant Sikh army."

This plan was communicated in advance to the British and full support offered by Gulab Singh, and in the battlefields, by the traitors -Tej Singh, Commander-in-Chief of the Sikh army and Lal Singh, the Vizier or Prime Minister, who was second in command. None of the three were Sikh or even Punjabi. They were Hindu Dogras.

With assurance of support from the treacherous triumvirate, British provocations and intrusions into Lahore territory became bolder as the British also continued to build up their border force. Finally, seizure of two villages in November 1845 by Major Broadfoot, the British agent at Ludhiana, probably sparked the first Anglo-Sikh War.

On the 11 December, 1845, the Sikh army of 35 to 40 thousand crossed Sutlej with 150 guns. However, the army remained in defensive positions within Lahore territory south of Sutlej. Even after declaring war, Sir Henry Hardinge, the Governor-General, had doubts about the legality and the rights and wrongs of the British campaign, as he confided to his staff at Mudki, the site of the opening battle. It is significant that, despite provocation, the large Sikh army did not attack Ferozepore, and adopted a defensive position at Ferozeshah.

The Sikh army was divided into four separate contingents (including the one at Philaur), and kept waiting in defensive positions until the British were able to build up their attacking forces. As promised by the traitors at Lahore, throughout the War, the British would be kept well informed about Sikh battle plans, deployment of forces, entrenchments and weaknesses in their defences.

The book is in two parts.

The first part gives a systematic account of each battle. Strength and military formations of opposing forces, the battle itself, casualties and the aftermath of each battle, are based on original records and eyewitness evidence pieced together painstakingly. Clear description of the terrain is given and the details about military units deployed on both sides, their locations and part played in each battle, is most remarkable.

The second part gives battlefield guides and locations of places of interest on, and near, the battlefields.

And so each battle is brought to life. Soldiers on both sides showed incredible bravery. None asked for mercy and no mercy was shown.

Both, Sir Henry Hardinge, the Governor General of India, an experienced military man himself, and Sir Hugh Gough, Commander-in-Chief, were present at the main battles of Mudki, Ferozeshah, and Sabraon.

Due to well planned attacks by the British force with detailed knowledge of Sikh defences and weak points, the battles themselves were quite short. Sabraon, the last battle, was around 4

hours, Aliwal around 2-3 hours, Bhudowal even less. Only Mudki and Ferozeshah, the opening battles, lasted around 8-9 hours. It was mainly due to the treacherous Dogra commanders of the Sikh Army always keeping it in a defensive position and not advancing during a British retreat, that battles like Ferozeshah and Bhudowal ended prematurely.

Despite a much longer supply line, compared with the Sikh army's, the British had better field intelligence and communication; their smaller numbers were deployed more efficiently, their battlefield tactics were better than the leaderless Sikh army; and they kept in battle formations and showed readiness to attack. The Sikh army remained divided and on the defensive and hardly used the cavalry.

The author has shown how opportunities to destroy the British army were intentionally missed by the Dogra commanders. With better military intelligence, some highly vulnerable targets like Ludhiana and Ferozepore with small contingents, and the military supply train from Delhi, could have been destroyed almost at the outset of hostilities, and even the capture of Delhi was well within Sikh grasp. Loss of confidence in the British invincibility would have brought forward the 1857 Indian mutiny.

The treachery of Tej Singh and Lal Singh claimed something like 10,000 lives at Sabraon where a single lane boat bridge had been partly destroyed by Lal Singh and Tej Singh "taking precaution to first retire across it themselves, their object being to effect, as far as possible, the annihilation of the feared and detested army." [William Edwardes, Under Secretary to the British Government].

As Gough and Hardinge watched the Sabraon battle from a watchtower at Rhodewalla village, Hardinge reminded a British officer, Thackwell, riding past, "When you get into the entrenchment, don't spare them".

The cavalry charge by Sardar Sham Singh Attariwala at Sabraon is described by eyewitnesses.

Dressed in white, he mounted his horse, "Shah Kabutar", and rallying 50 cavalymen behind him he charged HM 50th Regiment on the British left. He was later found riddled with seven shots. Hardinge later compared his attack to that of the Light Brigade, writing that "with Sham Singh fell the bravest of the Sikh generals."

Gough's pre-battle order not to spare any Sikh soldiers was carried out ruthlessly. "Now and then a few [Sikh soldiers] turned and rushed at us with their tulwars only to be caught on our bayonets or to be shot down. The slaughter was terrible." [Pte. Joseph Hewitt, 62nd Foot]. It is not clear if the Sikh soldiers had run out of ammunition at this stage. [The treacherous Dogra generals are said to have surreptitiously replaced the ammunition supplies with lentils!]

In this war, the British captured a total number of 320 guns of which 80 guns "had a bigger calibre than anything seen in Europe."

This study is a milestone achievement for Sikh historiographers in the comparatively new discipline of battlefield archaeology. It gives much new material for military analysts, historiographers, serious students of Sikh history and lay readers and tourists interested in understanding the battles of the First Anglo-Sikh War.

The book is well written. Perhaps the author could have given modern spellings for the names of some villages and places mentioned in the book.

Annex II

**The Truth About the Indian Mutiny of 1857**

by Ganda Singh

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The Sepoy revolt of 1857 is an engrossing subject. The Government of India commemorated this event with great enthusiasm on August 15, 1957, Independence Day. The mutiny at Meerut on May 10, 1857, which later became widespread and developed into a revolt in some parts of the U.P. and neighboring territories, has been called by some writers 'the Indian War of Independence'.

This view, however, has not been accepted by most recent researchers of any Indian historian of international fame. The full-throated praise showered by some of our modern political leaders on the sepoy mutineers and their so-called leaders have all been undeserved. And equally, if not more, undeserved have been the censures and charges of betrayal and treachery leveled against those who did not espouse the mutineers' act, or were opposed to their activities. The worst sufferers in the latter case have been the people of Punjab, particularly the Sikhs. This is because of the intensive propaganda of some politicians who do not appear to care for historical truths.

Some people say that the "Indian struggle for freedom (1857) failed because the Sikhs betrayed their comrades and sided with the British." The charge of 'betrayal' against the Sikhs could be justified only if they 'had given up,' or 'had been disloyal to, or had violated allegiance to a cause, person or trust they had at any time befriended or owned.' As history knows, the Sikhs were never at any time privy to, or took up the cause of the mutiny of 1857. They had never been taken into confidence. They had neither been consulted nor invited. The Poorbia sepoys, the soldiers of U.P., which formed the Bengal army were then, and are still called in Punjab, had not the moral courage to approach the Sikhs for co-operation and assistance against the British as they had themselves helped the British to destroy the independent kingdom of the Punjab in 1845-46 and reduced it to British subjection in 1848-49.

As such, there was not much love lost between the Poorbia sepoys and the people of the Punjab. The offensive airs of the Poorbia garrison in the Punjab had been particularly galling to the martial Sikhs. Their behavior towards the civil population during their first march in 1846 from the theatre of war to the capital of Lahore, and during the British occupation of the country before and after the annexation, had caused such, deep wounds in the hearts of the people as could not be healed in so short a period.

For the complete article, please visit:  
[http://www.sikhspectrum.com/082004/1857\\_mutiny\\_g\\_s.htm](http://www.sikhspectrum.com/082004/1857_mutiny_g_s.htm)

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### **Annex III**

## **Historical Episode of Komagata Maru during the Ghadar Movement** (Gurmukh Singh )

"This ship belongs to the whole of India, this is a symbol of the honour of India and if this was detained, there would be mutiny in the armies." (a passenger on Komagata Maru told a British officer.)

“The visions of men, widened by travel and contacts with citizens of a free country, will infuse a spirit of independence and foster yearnings for freedom in the minds of the emasculated subjects of alien rule.” (Gurdit Singh Sandhu of Sarhali)

When invited to write a paper about the Komagata Maru episode during the Ghadar Movement, I started with some facts and figures. I also had in mind the words of a renowned patriot, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, the first President of the Ghadar Party.

He said:

"We were not Sikhs or Punjabis. Our religion was patriotism."  
(Sohan Singh Bhakna)

The ship, Komagata Maru carried 376 passengers consisting of 340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims, and 12 Hindus, all British subjects. When looking at these figures, not only do we need to bear in mind the population mix of undivided Punjab before 1947, but also take into account the fact that the total Sikh population in 1914, when the ship set sail for Canada, was no more than about 3 million. It would seem that Baba Sohan Singh's statement that "We were not Sikhs..." is made in the spirit of a true patriot.

But then, Prof Puran Singh also wrote rather cryptically, "Punjab is neither Hindu nor Musalmaan; Punjab lives in the name of the Guru's"  
(Panjab na Hindu na Musalmaan, Panjab jeenda Gura(n) deya naam te")

Panjab is the land of the Gurus.  
Panjab, Gurua(n) di dharti hai.

That is because, Guru Nanak's wake-up call was for all, and above religious divisions. His clarion call to have belief in One Creator Being [and one humanity] was first heard in Panjab; and, according to Sir Mohamad Iqbal, "a perfect human being woke up India from a bad dream."

Phir akhir sada utthee toheed ki Panjab se  
Hind ko ek Mard-e-Kamal ne jagaya Khwaab se.....  
(Sir Mohamad Iqbal)

Therefore, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna's statement can be looked at in a more positive way.

The egalitarian ideology of Guru Nanak is the heritage of the Sikhs. It is also the heritage of all Indians and of all humanity. That heritage is not exclusive to the Sikhs; but also inclusive of all those who understand and accept the universal ever green message of Guru Nanak.

Only Guru Nanak Sahib's revolutionary ideology can explain the passenger figures on Komagata Maru being 340-24-12 being Sikh-Muslim-Hindu, respectively. Hugh Johnston wrote *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (1979, Toronto: Oxford University Press.) He does not mince his words; he writes about the "Sikh" challenge to Canada's colour bar.

I have digressed slightly; because, in the context of any phase of the struggle for people's freedom in India, it is important to understand why the Sikhs feature so prominently. Here, at the outset, I am intentionally alluding to the possible reasons for the later split in the Ghadar Party in America into Communist and Anti-Communist factions after World War I.

From childhood, a Sikh grows up listening to the fearless deeds of the Khalsa, and begins to understand that a Sikh is prepared to die as a warrior fighting for the righteous cause: Said Guru Nanak: "It is the right of a brave person to die for a worthy cause."

Maran munsa surya(n) hak hai.jo hoay maran parvano. SGGGS 579 (2nd;.... ..jo hoay mareh parvano..).SGGS 580

Before the martyrdoms of Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur, the Semitic martyrdom tradition, to which Guru Nanak Sahib's ideology gave a new meaning, was unheard of in India. [But this is a topic for another discussion.]

It is true that the inherited freedom-loving Sikh spirit was further influenced by socialist thought popular in western universities.

Sikhs living abroad resented the prejudicial treatment they were receiving (and continue to receive to this day) from the majority white communities in the countries they migrated to. Their anger began to be directed towards the British colonial rule in India.

In 1913, the Pacific Coast Hindustan Association, popularly known as the Ghadar Party was formed, mostly by Sikh emigrants to the United States. Ghadar means "revolt" or "rebellion." It is an Urdu word derived from Arabic. The President of the Ghadar Party was Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna. Others like Kartar Singh Sarabha, Rashbehari Bose, Dyal, Tarak Nath Das, Maulavi Barkatullah and V G Pingle were the leading figures.

Komagata Maru incident was one of several in the history of the struggle for Indian independence, in the early 20th century. This episode of connected events, started with a challenge to exclusion laws in both Canada and the United States. These racially biased laws, were designed to keep out people from the Indian sub-continent.

The Canadian government passed an order-in-council on January 8, 1908, that prohibited immigration of persons who "in the opinion of the Minister of the Interior" did not "come from the country of their birth or citizenship by a continuous journey and, or, through tickets purchased before leaving the country of their birth or nationality."

In effect that applied mainly to Indians; because a continuous journey by sea from India to Canada or America was not possible. Ships had to stop in Japan or Hawaii. Yet, in 1913 alone, Canada accepted a record number of over 400,000 immigrants from Europe.

On the American side, a legal battle over the rights of Indians to obtain U.S. citizenship was being fought by Bhagat Singh Thind, whose youngest brother Jagat Singh was a passenger on Kamagata Maru.

The background to the incident was that a Sikh businessman, Gurdit Singh (1861 – 1954), a supporter of the Ghadar Party, established the Guru Nanak Steamship Company and chartered a Japanese ship, Kamagata Maru, to transport Indians to Canada in defiance of Canadian exclusion laws. He was well aware of the laws and by challenging the continuous journey regulation, he wanted to open the door for immigration from India to Canada.

So we need to look at the incident and the Ghadar Movement in the historical context of the struggle for the freedom of the Indian sub-continent from colonial rule.

The ship was scheduled to start from Hong Kong in March 1914, but Gurdit Singh's planned voyage was illegal under Canadian laws. He was arrested for selling tickets for this illegal voyage.

However, he was later released on bail and given permission by the Governor of Hong Kong to set sail. The reason for the Governor's decision is not clear. It may be that there was doubt in the Governor's mind about his own legal position for not allowing the ship to set sail. After all, he was not bound by Canadian laws.

The ship departed on April 4 with 165 passengers. After picking up more passengers at Shanghai on April 8, the ship arrived at Yokohama on April 14. It left Yokohama on May 3 with 376 passengers, mostly Sikh, as we have seen, and sailed into Burrard Inlet, near Vancouver, on May 23. However, it was not allowed to dock.

The name of the first immigration officer who boarded the ship is given as Fred "Cyclone" Taylor.

From this point on, as in every story, there are heroes and villains. The heroes are the defiant passengers of Kamagata Maru and the Ghadar Party organizers of the "Shore Committee", and the villains are the racist law makers and politicians, and the overzealous officials who made life difficult for the passengers.

Quote from Kavneet Singh's review of *The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Color Bar*:  
By Hugh Johnston: *The name of William Charles Hopkinson, is mentioned as "a British secret service agent, working for the Canadian and the US governments". He is described as a "true slimy character of the British in their duplicity and wiliness when dealing with anyone other than their own. The overt racism by the officials went against all logic and reason even when it came to the law. Every unethical and immoral trick was used to circumvent the law simply to frustrate the entry of the Sikhs into Canada."* (December 2013 "Sikh Bulletin" review of Hugh Johnston's book by Kavneet Singh)

A Dr. Raghunath Singh, probably a Hindu Panjabi, is also mentioned as a possible "traitor who decided to blow the whistle on his co-passengers."

At that time, Balwant Singh was the head priest of the Gurdwara in Vancouver. He had been one of the three delegates sent to London and India to represent the case of Indians in Canada. He and another revolutionary, Maulavi Barkatullah met with the ship en route. Revolutionary literature was distributed and political meetings took place on the ship.



A Conservative MP, H H Stevens, who was in league with an immigration official Malcolm R. J. Reid, organised a public meeting to send the ship back without allowing any passengers to disembark. There is little doubt that Stevens, the politician, in league with Reid, the official, were behind the mistreatment of the passengers. Under political pressure, the Conservative Premier of British Columbia, Richard McBride, gave public assurance that passengers would not be allowed to enter the country.

During this time a "Shore Committee" was formed and organised protest meetings in Canada and the United States. It is quite remarkable that in those days the Committee managed to raise Canadian dollars 22,000 to charter a ship, while resolving to go back to India to start a revolution.

A court case in the name of a passenger, Munshi Singh was started to test the exclusion laws. However, on 6 July "the full bench of the B.C. Court of Appeal gave an unanimous judgment that under new orders-in-council, it had no authority to interfere with the decisions of the Department of Immigration and Colonization."

Passengers became restless in the cramped conditions on the ship. They sacked the Japanese captain, but the Canadian government ordered the harbour tug Sea Lion to push the ship out to sea. On July 19, the angry passengers attacked the police with lumps of coal and bricks. HMCS Rainbow, a former Royal Navy ship, under the command of Commander Hose stood by.

In the end, out of 376, only 20 passengers, who had not violated the exclusion laws, were admitted to Canada. The ship was forced to leave for Asia on July 23, exactly two months after its arrival in Vancouver.

During this time, the British colonial rulers were being kept informed of all these events including the declared revolutionary agenda of the Shore Committee and the role of the Ghadar Party ring leaders on board the Kamagata Maru.

The ship arrived in Calcutta on September 27, 1914. It was stopped outside the harbour by a British gunboat, and the passengers were placed under guard. When the ship docked at Budge Budge Ghat, the police went to arrest Baba Gurdit Singh and about 20 other men who were identified as revolutionaries.

They resisted arrest and there was a general riot. Shots were fired and 19 of the passengers were killed. "Some escaped, but the remainder were arrested and imprisoned or sent to their villages and kept under village arrest for the duration of the First World War.

This incident became known as the "Budge Budge Riot".

The Kamagata Maru incident inflamed passions and gave a massive boost to the cause of the Ghadar Party. Meetings were organised by the Party not only in California in 1914 but also in other diaspora countries and members were recruited to the revolutionary movement. The incident was used as a rallying point by the leaders. The declared intention was to start a massive uprising in India. Some of them returned to India at the start of World War I, and started anti-British activities.

Kartar Singh Sarabha, was an eighteen years old student at the University of California, Berkely. He returned to India and, possibly with the Indian Mutiny of 1857 in mind, incited

Indian soldiers to revolt. He was captured with others, tried at Lahore, and sentenced on 13th September 1915. He was hanged three days later.

With Indian and world attention focussed on the War, any possibility of a popular uprising was crushed quickly by close of year 1915.

That plan did not work immediately but did take India one significant step closer to independence.

Before concluding, I would like to say something about the true story of Indian independence. Depending upon own leanings, some would like to start it from the Indian Mutiny in 1857. However, I would suggest that struggle for the liberation of the Indian sub-continent started with Guru Nanak Sahib's challenge to Babar, the Mughal invader, with a tacit message of revolt to the people of India when he said "Hindustan draaya...". He used the word Hindostan i.e. the whole people of the Indian sub-continent, who feared for their lives. The later colonial powers also were invaders, albeit, more sophisticated and less cruel. Nevertheless, their intention was to conquer and enslave Indians.

5th Nanak, Guru Arjun, spoke of "halemi raj", in which no one would inflict pain or suffering on another; and, 9th Nanak, Guru Tegh Bahadur, told the same people to be brave, and "frighten none, and fear no-one."

We can start the story of Indian independence from Guru Gobind Singh's challenge to the hill rajas at Rawalsar in 1701 to rise up against slavery and overthrow the foreign invaders. From Baba Banda Singh Bahadur onwards, thousands of Sikh martyrs of the 18th Century Khalsa continued the struggle for people's freedom.

Despite good Anglo-Sikh relations, a series of incidents kept reminding the freedom loving Sikhs that they were not free under the British colonial rule. The freedom movement in Panjab had in fact started as soon as Panjab was annexed in 1849. This picked up at national level towards the end of the 19th Century when the Indian National Congress party was formed in 1885.

The Sikh writers, preachers and poets had not forgotten, nor were they going to let the people of Panjab forget, the loss of their Panjabi Khalsa Raj. It was a soldier in the Khalsa army of Panjab who first resolved to fight against British colonial rule following the annexation of Panjab. This man was Baba Ram Singh (1816 – 1885). His stress was on simple living, regular meditation on Naam (God's Name) and boycott of all foreign goods and services. His method of fighting foreign rule was effective and later adopted by the Indian national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi.

Following the Kamagata Maru episode and the Ghadar Party activities, when the Sikh jawans returned home after the First World War, they realised that they were denied the freedom for which they had made such great sacrifices during the War. New Sikh movements started. Some of these aimed to reform own religious institutions and to free them from British control. Others arose to oppose British colonial rule. British administrators of India were concerned; because they had experience of Sikh determination when they were fighting for a just cause. Sikhs suffered the consequences for their lead role in the freedom struggle by making over 80% of all sacrifices (hangings and life imprisonments resulting from the freedom movement). These sacrifices in the struggle for freedom were made by a community numbering less than 2% of the population of the sub-continent!

The next phase of the Indian struggle for independence was triggered by the massacre at the Jallianwala Bagh at Amritsar, the holy city of the Sikhs. It was on the Vaisakhi day on 13th April, 1919.

However, in the context of the Kamagata Maru episode, we can say that the final phase of Indian independence started with the Ghadar Party, further motivated by this historic incident.

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Recommended further reading:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Komagata\\_Maru\\_incident#cite\\_note-8](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Komagata_Maru_incident#cite_note-8)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghadar\\_Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghadar_Party)

“The Voyage of the Komagata Maru”

The Sikh Challenge to Canada’s Color Bar:

Hugh Johnston (1979)[162P] ISBN:0-7748-0340-1