

B.A. 1ST YEAR IIND SEMESTER

Topic: The Sikh military system under Dal Khalsa and Ranjeet Singh

The Sikh Khalsa Army, Khalsa or simply Sikh Army was the military force of the Sikh Empire, formed in 1799 with the capture of Lahore by Ranjit Singh. From then on the army was modernized on Franco-British principles. It was divided in three wings: the Fauj-i-Khas (elites), Fauj-i-Ain (regular force) and Fauj-i-Be Qawaid (irregulars). Due to the lifelong efforts of the Maharaja and his European officers, it gradually became a prominent fighting force of Asia. Ranjit Singh changed and improved the training and organisation of his army. He reorganized responsibility and set performance standards in logistical efficiency in troop deployment, manoeuvre, and marksmanship. He reformed the staffing to emphasize steady fire over cavalry and guerrilla warfare, improved the equipment and methods of war. The military system of Ranjit Singh combined the best of both old and new ideas. He strengthened the infantry and the artillery. He paid the members of the standing army from treasury, instead of the Mughal method of paying an army with local feudal levies.

***Before the reign of Ranjit Singh:**

Before the reign of Ranjit Singh, the armies in Punjab consisted purely of cavalry. After Ranjit Singh became the Sardar of Sukerchakia Misl he gradually unified most of the Punjab through conquests and diplomacy. However the Afghans, the British and the Gurkhas remained a threat while his empire was in its infancy. Therefore, in 1805, he began recruiting regular forces and employing deserters from the East India Company as officers or soldiers. This latter tactic did not work particularly well because most of the deserters were constantly in touch with the British. The British were alarmed with the rapid conquests of Ranjit Singh and sent many diplomatic missions to help the Phulkian sardars from a possible conquest of their lands and to check the growing power of the Sikh sovereign.

A Muslim regiment under Charles Metcalfe, 1st Baron Metcalfe was sent to Amritsar for talks with the Maharaja. The soldiers created noise through their chants as they approached Ranjit Singh's fort in Amritsar and passed near the Golden Temple and caused an irregular detachment of Nihang guards to inquire about the disturbances during prayer, before they were challenged by the Muslim soldiers who fired upon them. The Sikh Nihangs shot off many Musket and matchlock volleys rather than a sword charge. It resulted in the death of many of Metcalfe's escorts, while others were wounded. This impressed Ranjit Singh and left a deep impact on him, as the Nihangs had quickly adopted the line formations of Metcalfe's escorts and then shot off their volleys, essentially immobilizing the entire Muslim battalion. The Maharaja then accepted The Treaty of Amritsar (1809), and saw the British as allies for the moment as he took the British refusal to engage after the assault on Metcalfe's convoy as well as the Sikh army's frequent unanswered incursions and attacks south of the Sutlej on British army officers in Ludhiana as signs of weakness on the British's part.

***During the Era of Ranjit Singh:**

Throughout 1805, Ranjit Singh recruited many East India Company deserters in his army. The early results were unimpressive. During the visit of Charles Metcalfe, he was shown a band of soldiers, most of them wearing traditional kurtas and colourful turbans, while others wore European infantry ornaments. They had either traditional matchlock or European muskets.

Previously, as the Sikhs refused to join infantry service, Pashtuns, Gurkhas and Purbias served in this sector of the army. However, with the passage of time and owing to Ranjit Singh's efforts, Sikhs too began to join the infantry in large numbers. In 1822 Ranjit Singh employed a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars, General Jean-Baptiste Ventura to train the infantry in European style. In a few years, under his command, the infantry was modernized in French pattern. Similarly, in 1822, Ranjit Singh employed another French Napoleonic War veteran, General Jean-François Allard to modernize the Sikh cavalry. In 1827 Claude Auguste Court was hired to modernize the artillery, and in 1832 Colonel Alexander Gardner was employed to modernize the artillery.

Ranjit Singh wanted to westernise his army thoroughly. However, due to various reasons he couldn't discard the military system that he had inherited from his forefathers. The military system of the Sikh Empire under Ranjit Singh finally evolved as a compromise between the old and the new ideas. Thus, the military system of the Sikh Empire is termed as a Franco-British system in the Indian subcontinent.

***Composition:**

Sikhs formed the bulk of the Sikh Empire's army. The Sikh Army was mainly Punjabi with a predominantly Sikh cadre, but also had a significant multi-religious component made up from other parts of the Punjabi people. There were soldiers of different religious backgrounds (i.e. Muslims and Hindus) and there were soldiers of different tribal backgrounds: Pashtuns, Dogras, Khatri, Jats, Kashyap Rajputs, Ramgarhias, Nepalis and European mercenaries. A promotion to a higher military rank was based on military skill, not hereditary background, so the Sikh Khalsa Army was a classic meritocracy. Enlistment in the army was entirely voluntary, and only strong, physically fit men were recruited. The task of recruiting officers was in the hands of the Generals or the Maharaja himself. Every year, a lot of money was spent on presents and honours for the soldiers who had displayed gallantry. Titles like "Fateh-o Nusrat Nasib", "Zafar Jhang" and "Bright Star of Punjab" were given to many Generals. For showing disloyalty to the state and other such crimes, a soldier could be imprisoned or exiled. No man ever in the Sikh Empire was given the death penalty. Usually, the soldiers were granted two months of leave, either in the winter season or before it. When soldiers were required, leaves were cancelled and they were granted leave at the end of the campaign. The pay of the Sikh Khalsa Army was higher than the pay of the British East India Company and other Asian armies.

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