

The British Response to War of Independence in the Punjab

During 1857-58, at many places in the Punjab, the people fought bravely for the independence of their country. There occurred many events of resistance. It is a fact that in the Punjab, the War was not on that large scale as it was in the Central and Northern India. Similarly it is wrong to assert that Punjab did not take part in the war, or it only supported the British. Karl Marx has rightly pointed out that the Punjab is declared to be quiet, but at the same time we are informed that, at Ferozepur, on the 13th of June, military executions had taken place, while Vaughan's Corps 5th Punjab Infantry- is praised for having behaved admirably in pursuit of the 55th Native Infantry. This, it must be confessed, is a very queer sort of quiet.¹ So we see that like other areas, in the Punjab, too, there were murders, incendiaries, conspiracies, disloyalty, disarming, battles, executions, pursuits, panics and treacheries.² But as the authorities in the province were fully prepared to crush the resistance, so the freedom-fighters in this province could not succeed. In the Punjab, the spirit of the War was forcibly kept down.³

The Lahore Administration received timely and advance warning, via telegram, of the adverse winds, which had started blowing in the Central Provinces.⁴ While the sepoys in the Punjab were getting ready to rise, the administration took them by surprise by its foreknowledge of their intentions. The disarming and disbanding of army that followed, took the sting out of a dangerous situation in the province. In the Punjab, a full-scale war had only been prevented by disbanding of native troops.⁵ A slight lent up on the part of the civil and military authorities in the Punjab might have cost British Empire.⁶

Determined to maintain their hold over the Punjab at any rate, the British sought to prevent disturbances by timely disarming the most suspected Bengal regiments, and by mercilessly destroying those who had forestalled their plans and risen. The British authorities took every step to crush the resistance in the Punjab. They systematically withheld from the Punjabis, all news and information about the deteriorating situation in other parts of India, and displayed an image of strength, which was a great contrast to the real state of affairs. To keep the people of the Punjab ignorant of the actual position, strict mail censorship was introduced in the province. At most places, the district officers in person opened every postbag and caught suspicious letters, especially those addressed to the sepoys.⁷

Besides the mail service, the native press could be the only source for the people to get information, but it had already been put under a strict censorship. At Peshawar, the editor of *Murtazai* was imprisoned, and his paper was banned. Another local paper of Multan was likewise banned. The editor of *Chashma-i Faiz* (Source of Benefit) was ordered to remove his establishment from Sialkot to

* Dr. Turab-ul-Hassan Sargana, Assistant Professor, Department of History, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan. Contact No. 0300-6563092, E.mail: turabsargana@yahoo.com, turabsargana@gmail.com

Lahore, where his paper, together with the two already published at the capital, was put under strict surveillance.⁸

As the British had decided to crush the resistance in the Punjab by every means, they violated the existing laws, and introduced many new laws which were harsh and draconian. A highly oppressive law, Act. XIV of 1857, was passed and vigorously enforced to curb the increasing turbulence in the province. It empowered “any two officers sitting in commission to try and execute any traitor”.⁹ Armed with such wide powers, the British officers undertook the most drastic measures to suppress the War. Likewise, the police was exhorted to use their arms freely, “against anyone found in the act of perpetrating violent crime”.¹⁰ Licences to carry firearms were withdrawn, and sale of lead and sulphur were prohibited. Ferries were closely guarded, boats withdrawn, and free movement of people restricted.¹¹ Non-military Hindustanis in the Punjab were suspected of disloyalty to the Government; they were either closely watched or expelled from the province.¹² Above all, a ruthless system of collective responsibility and community punishment was instituted to subdue the province.¹³

Immediately after learning of disasters at Meerut and Delhi, the authorities began to recruit extra police. Ferries were to be guarded, stations watched, roads to be patrolled and posts strengthened. In his letter dated September 9, 1857, the Chief Commissioner, John Lawrence, informed the Governor General that until then, 28,246 additional soldiers and policemen had been recruited since the outbreak of the War.¹⁴ Moreover, the Punjab Administration Report informs us that in 1857, the Punjab police had the strength of 53,226 soldiers and police officers.¹⁵

At Lahore some sepoy of 26th N. I. rose up against the British. Out of them, 282 were arrested by Frederic Cooper, Deputy Commissioner Amritsar. Confined in a bastion, they were pinioned and tied together and brought out in batches of ten to be shot. In total, two hundred and thirty seven were killed in this way, while the remaining forty-five died of fright, exhaustion, heat and suffocation.¹⁶ In this way, Cooper repeated here the tragedy of Holwell’s Black Hole.¹⁷

Instead of condemning this cruel and inhuman act of Cooper, the British higher authorities applauded him. John Lawrence, Chief Commissioner of the Punjab, wrote on August 2, 1857, the very next day of the event:¹⁸

I congratulate you on your success against the 26th N.I.
You and your police acted with much energy and spirit, and deserve well of the State. I trust the fate of these sepoy will operate as a warning to others. Every effort should be exerted to glean up all who are yet at large.

Greathead remarked, “The sacrifice of five hundred villainous lives for the murder of two English men is a retribution that will be remembered”.¹⁹ Robert Montgomery, Financial Commissioner, the next highest authority in the Punjab after John Lawrence, also praised Cooper and wrote:²⁰

All honour to you for what you have done, and right well you did it...It will be a feather to your cap as long as you live...I congratulate you very heartily on your success. There

will be some stragglers, have those all picked up, and any you get send us now. You have had slaughter enough. We want a few for the troops here, and also for evidence.

Like a very loyal and obedient servant, Cooper obeyed immediately, and captured another forty-two men, and sent them to Lahore, where they all were blown from guns to pieces in the presence of a whole brigade.²¹

As these events were described by Cooper himself with pride, but it was also criticized by some, as Montgomery Martin writes:²²

Within forty-eight hours of the date of the crime, there fell by the law nearly 500 men. What crime? What law? The reader may ask, demanded the extermination of a helpless multitude, described by the very best authority as unarmed and panic stricken, fanishing with hunger, and exhausted with fatigue.

In this way, the British authorities unleashed a reign of terror, and ruthlessly suppressed all attempts at raising the standard of revolt in the Punjab. The British officers were dispatched in all directions in order to crush the activities of the freedom-fighters. "The Principal that he is not for us, is against us," wrote Cooper, "in this crisis in the Punjab was strictly followed. There was no pause. Treason and sedition were dogged into the very privacy of the harem, and up to the sacred sanctuaries of mosques and shrines".²³ The British developed an organized espionage system, and prompt and stern punishments were meted out to those who showed even the slightest sympathy with the freedom-fighters' cause, which spread awe and terror throughout the province. "Anyone who talks treason", wrote Montgomery to Sir Charles Raikes, "is instantly hanged, we will not allow it to be breathed, and we have men mixed with the population to report it".²⁴ There were spies in the market-place, at the festival, in the places of worship, in the jails, in the hospitals, in the regimental bazaars, among the bathers at the tanks, among the village circle round the well under the big tree, among the pettifogging hangers-on of the courts, among the stone-breakers of the highways, and among the dusty travellers at the *serais*. No man's tongue was his own property.²⁵

Once the news arrived from Rawalpindi that three native chiefs were plotting against the British. John Lawrence immediately ordered a spy to attend the meeting. On the spy's report, John Lawrence sent a message to hang them all. The chiefs were, consequently, hanged. The same happened at Benares where thrity *zamindars* were hanged on mere suspicion of sympathizing with their own countrymen, and whole villages were burnt down on the same plea.²⁶ Similarly, the report by G.C. Barnes, Commissioner and Superintendent Cis-Sutlej States, gives information that in that region alone, two hundred and fifty-two freedom-fighters were executed, one hundred and twenty-three suffered death by process of law, while one hundred and two were sentenced to imprisonment.²⁷ Many important persons suspected of sympathy with anti-British elements were heavily fined. All *zamindars* through whose villages the freedom-fighters passed, and who failed to report the circumstances shared the same fate. Those who were suspected of affording any aid were imprisoned for seven to fourteen years. Punitive fines were collected from the inhabitants of towns or villages, which were reported to be disaffected.²⁸

At Hoshairpur, on July 12, 1857, five of the ringleaders were tried in the morning by a commission and hanged before evening.²⁹ On June 9, at Lahore two men of the 35th N.I. were blown from guns in the Anarkali parade ground for sedition and intended uprising.³⁰ In District Ferozepur, of the hundred and forty-two freedom-fighters captured, forty were executed, and the remainder, along with twenty-five of the Artillery horse-keepers, transported or imprisoned. In the jail eighteen persons including the Nawab of Raneea, who had been captured by G. Rickett, Deputy Commissioner, in the District Ludhiana, were hanged.³¹ At Ludhiana, the name of G. Ricketts, became synonymous with 'terror' among the people of the district.³² The timely arrival of a body of loyal Sikh soldiers enabled Ricketts to suppress the freedom-fighters in Ludhiana and its suburbs. Bodies of police under European officers entered each house, and captured the arms concealed therein. Eleven cart-loads of arms were thus discovered and seized. Twenty-two of the freedom-fighters were hanged and the population of the city was fined Rs. 55,294 in total. All native houses within three hundred yards of the fort were levelled. The Gujjars of the whole district were disarmed, and deprived of their boats, and inflated skins (for crossing the river) were made contraband amongst them.³³

In July at Multan, Subedar-Major Nahur Khan of the 69th Regiment, N.I., and ten other sepoy of the same regiment were confined, court-martialled and sentenced to death on the charges of exciting uprising. Similarly, a Subedar and eight sepoy of the 14th Regiment, N.I., who rose against the British at Jhelum were arrested by the River Police near Qadirpur, brought into Jhang, tried, convicted and executed.³⁴

The British seized grain and cattle everywhere to force the people to keep tranquil. In Gugera, many thousands of bullocks and buffaloes belonging to freedom-fighters had been captured, and sent down to Multan or to Lahore for sale. During Gugera Movement, only from village of Jhamra, where Ahmad Khan Kharral lived, twenty families were arrested on September 18, 1857, seven hundred cattle were captured and the village was burnt.³⁵ In fact, in some cases, it was the British officers who were the cattle-lifters. On September 22, Doburji, close to which was the village of a Kathia chief, Hashim, was also set on fire.³⁶ The clans were also made to pay in cash. The entire sum realized from the Gugera people amounts to exactly 5.5 lacs of rupees or £ 55,000.³⁷ To chase the Gugera freedom-fighters, the British attacked the village of Sahuka (near Burewala in District Vehari), the whole male inhabitants were put to sword, the crops and granaries were destroyed, and the town was burnt. After this, the British advanced to Jamlaira, Lukhokey and Burra Bela (three towns near Burewala in District Vehari) where they did likewise.³⁸

Gugera uprising came to its end in January 1858 when almost all its prominent leaders surrendered to the British. According to native accounts, hundreds of the people were hanged, hundreds were blown by cannons, and countless persons were sent to the Andaman Islands, popularly known as Kala Pani.³⁹ Among the persons sent to Andaman Islands, prominent were Walidad Mardana, Mokha Vehniwal, Nadir Shah Qureshi, Majhi Bushaira Kharral, Lal Kathia (son of Ghazi Kathia), Muhamand Kathia (son of Jalla), Muhammad Yar

Mardana, Rehmat Khan, Kadir Mardana (Kada), Bahawal Fatiana, Murad Fatiana and many others. As a *dhola* informs:⁴⁰

These British hanged Buland, the son of Beg Tarhana at Fatehpur Gugera who was a bridegroom of Sandal Bar. They arrested Lal, son of Ghazi Kathia, Muhamand, son of Jalla Kathia, Walidad Mardana and Mokha, son of Korhi Vehniwal. These British also arrested Murad and Bahawal Fatianas who always helped the people to recover their stolen cattle. They banished Nadir Shah Qureshi from Pindi Sheikh Musa. In this way, they separated a beautiful swan from its flock. Having chains in their feet and hands, they performed their Divine Duty.

In Peshawar Valley on July 2, 1857, Major Vaughan, then commanding at Murdan, invaded the freedom-fighters with about four hundred horse and foot, and two mountain guns. He killed Mir Baz Khan, a local leader, also captured a Rohila leader, and hanged him along with many other freedom-fighters. He burnt down two villages, and the people of many other villages were fined.⁴¹ During the Murree Movement, the country was scoured, villages were burnt, their cattle harried and their men seized. Twenty-seven men were punished, of whom fifteen suffered death. The smoke of the eleven villages, which were burnt, could be seen from far off distance.⁴²

Deputy Commissioner Rawalpindi reported the result of prosecutions under the Mutiny Acts by various civil and military commissions. He did not include the result of the military trials at Murree. According to his report, three hundred and eleven persons were punished by the Civil, and hundred and ninety-four were punished by the Military Commission.⁴³ Similarly, Lieutenant Batty's report shows that at Muree till January 9, 1858, the number of persons punished was two hundred and seventeen also that 2781 head of horned cattle had been confiscated.⁴⁴ The number of executions, which took place in District Peshawar for crimes connected with the War of Independence, is enough to show the brutality with which the British quenched the resistance. This may be classed as follows:⁴⁵

| People punished at Peshawar | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Type of punishment | No. of people |
| Blown from guns | 47 |
| Shot by musketry | 715 |
| Hanged by military authorities | 28 |
| Hanged by civil authorities | 20 |
| Total | 810 |

In addition to the above, about three hundred sepoys were slain during pursuit while endeavouring to escape.⁴⁶ According to the Punjab Administration Report, the numbers of people who were punished in the Punjab during the year 1857-58 were as follows:⁴⁷

| People who were Punished in the Punjab during 1857-58 | | | |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|
| People who were punished during 1857-58 | By Military tribunals | By civil authorities | Total |
| Hanged | 86 | 300 | 386 |
| Shot | 628 | 1370 | 1998 |
| Sentenced to Imprisonment | 245 | 1226 | 1471 |
| Flogged | 0 | 1501 | 1501 |
| Fined | 0 | 272 | 272 |
| Total number of People Punished | 959 | 4669 | 5628 |

The oppressive steps taken by John Lawrence provoked a strong protest even in the British circles. George Crawshay, a proprietor of the East India Company and Mayor of Gateshead, criticized him for unleashing a 'reign of terror' in the Punjab, matched only by its predecessor in Paris. Crawshay maintained that like Lawrence, Robespierre was also successful in France. He strongly opposed the grant of an annuity of £ 2000 to John Lawrence for his success in the Punjab.⁴⁸

Historical evidence presented in this chapter reveals that the Punjab was not devoid of patriotic people who sacrificed their lives for the sake of independence of their homeland. It is a fact that in the Punjab, the War was not on a scale as it was at Meerut and Delhi, but, at the sametime, it is wrong to assert that the Punjab did not take part in the War of Independence of 1857-58. In the Punjab, at several places people rose against the British government. The Gugera Movement extended to hundreds of miles, i.e. from the borders of District Lahore to Serai Sidhu in District Multan and Shorkot in District Jhang. Assessing the extent, significance and its severity, the reinforcements from the districts of Lahore, Multan, Jhang, Leiah and Gujranwala reached Gugera to help the British authorities. The Commissioners of Lahore and Multan Divisions reached Gugera with their armies and their allies. Like Gugera, the civilian population of Murree, Jhajjar, Haryana, Ludhiana, Farrukhnagar, Bahadurgarh and Rewari also rose against the British government and staked their lives and property for the independence of their country and to eliminate the foreign rulers from their homeland. The British brutally crushed the resistance in the Punjab. They unleashed a reign of terror, introduced harsh and draconian laws, and consequently, succeeded in crushing the War of Independence in the Punjab.

References

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