**The Anglo-Sikh Wars and Annexation of Punjab**

The First Anglo-Sikh War (1845-1846) was a real test of the British East India Company’s mastery of India. During the Napoleonic wars (1793-1815) the British finally defeated their French rivals on the sub-continent and dominated most of its native princes.

An exception was the powerful Sikh kingdom of Punjab, ruled until his death in 1839 by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. During his reign he built up one of the most formidable armies in the world, the Khalsa. These Sikh soldiers were subject to strict discipline, trained by European and American mercenaries and armed with the latest European weaponry. Their morale was high, crucially underpinned by a strong religious faith that demanded complete loyalty, courage and devotion to their religion and ruler. (Sikhs only formed about a sixth of the population of Punjab so Hindu and Muslim soldiers also served under Ranjit Singh).



Maharaja Ranjit Singh (Toor Collection)

Ranjit Singh (who had lost his left eye to smallpox when a child) built up this force partly to defend the Punjab from attack by Muslim Afghan raiders to the northwest and as a deterrent to the ambitions of the East India Company on his southern border.

As long as Ranjit Singh lived, it suited the British to treat him as an ally. It meant they had a stable, powerful state on their northern frontier which blocked potential Muslim invaders from beyond and saved the expense of maintaining a large military presence in that part of India.

However, a dangerous period of instability in the Sikh kingdom followed Ranjit Singh’s death in 1839.

A five-year-old son, Duleep Singh, eventually succeeded to the throne with his mother Maharani Jind Kaur acting as regent. However, the Sikh court in Lahore (riven by scandal, rival factions, intrigue, corruption and approaching bankruptcy) proved incapable of controlling its all-powerful Khalsa Army. Its unpredictable will was expressed through influential committees (*panchayat*s) to which all ranks had a right of free expression. (There is a comparison to be made with the radicalism in the ranks of the New Model Army in England in the late 1640s.)

Elsewhere the East India Company suffered a defeat during the disastrous occupation of Afghanistan (1839-1842) which damaged its military reputation.

The British viewed the continuing instability of Punjab with alarm, speculating whether the restless and ever expanding Khalsa (numbering some 80,000 by 1845) might not invade British territory at some point. While British policy in India itself was generally expansionist in this period it is unlikely that the East India Company sought to annex Punjab at this stage as it had neither the manpower nor resources to do so. It has been suggested that figures in the Lahore court wanted to start a war with the East India Company deliberately, hoping that a defeated Khalsa would make it easier to control.

Following a period of rising tension, the Khalsa crossed the weakly defended British frontiers in December 1845. On the first day of the pivotal Battle of Ferozeshah (sometimes named as Ferozepore in contemporary British sources) the exhausted East India Company forces came close to defeat. The claim that senior British commanders also contemplated an unconditional surrender to the Khalsa is derived from one British source, the dairy of Robert Cust, a political agent or intelligence officer.

If the British had been defeated at Ferozeshah then the consequences would have been far reaching. British control of India itself might have collapsed with a victorious Khalsa free to occupy and exploit as much territory as it could conquer, to the possible consternation of the Lahore court.

As it was, the Khalsa were probably deliberately betrayed by two of their leading commanders who deployed their forces at Ferozeshah to ensure a Sikh defeat. One of the generals, Tej Singh, was certainly in secret correspondence with a British political agent and asked his advice about how he could lose the battle.

In 1846, after the Khalsa had been defeated at Ferozeshah and in later battles, Maharani Jind Kaur concluded a treaty which kept her son on the Punjabi throne but that lost territory and turned his kingdom into a client state of the East India Company.

Following a rebellion which led to the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848-1849) the Sikh kingdom was finally annexed to British India. Its boy-king, Maharaja Duleep Singh, was forced to leave Punjab, converted to Christianity and sent to Britain for education as an English gentleman.