

SELF IDENTITY AND BRITISH PERCEPTION OF SIKH SOLDIERS

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Abstract

This paper is oriented towards identifying the various elements that went into the formation of the self perception of the Sikh soldiers. The origins of the Martial Race theory, that was used very effectively and innovatively by the British to mobilise the Sikhs and induct them into the most vital and visible echelons of the British Indian army, will be traced. The socio-religious and economic implications that made the Sikhs readily accept and perpetuate the martial race considerations will be explored. The hard pragmatism, realistic evaluation and real-political considerations that intertwined to lend credence and support to the perception of the Sikhs as the premier martial community of India in not only the Army top brass and officers, but also British decision making and opinion forming class and institutions in Britain will be dwelled upon. The chapter will look into the self perception of Sikhs and the various ways in which they were viewed by the British, both as a community and as soldiers.

Keywords- Sikh, British, Soldiers, Perception, Martial Race Theory

Ashis Nandy in his book 'The Intimate enemy'¹ puts forward the contention that colonial cultures bind the ruler and the ruled into an 'unbreakable dyadic relationship'. Many Indians unconsciously identified their salvation in emulating the British – in friendship and in enmity.

They may have not shared the British idea of Martial races- the hyper masculine, manifestly courageous, superbly loyal Indians castes and subcultures mirroring the British middle class sexual stereotypes- but they did resurrect the ideology of the martial races latent in the traditional Indian concept of statecraft and gave the idea a new centrality.

Ashis Nandy also argues that Rudyard Kipling was 'probably the most creative builder of the political myths which a colonial power needs to sustain its self esteem'. The positive qualities which Kipling identified as the 'attributes of good savages', were found in the 'devoted, obedient martial races of India'.²

¹ Ashis Nandy (1983) *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and recovery of Self under colonialism*; Oxford university press, Delhi

On the other hand, Amerdeep Singh Panesar³ in his thesis asserts that ‘positioning of Sikhs as a martial race was a multi-faceted negotiation and not simply an imposition from above’. This chapter attempts to ascertain how much truth there is in this assertion. The various factors that went into the evolution of the Sikh martial identity have been discussed below.

Role of Sikh Gurus in the militant tradition

The history of Sikhism is associated closely with the socio-political in the North of the Indian subcontinent⁴ and the faith emerged out of the churn of the various streams of thought and geopolitical realities. After his father’s execution at the hands of the Mughals, the sixth Guru departed from the pacific stream of piety which had flowed steadily since the days of Guru Nanak. Guru Hargobind was a physically imposing personality who started the militarisation of the Sikhs⁵ as he had been enjoined by his father, “to sit fully armed on his throne and maintain an army to the best of his ability”⁶. The inevitable conflict between the temporal and the spiritual world that confronted the Sikhs and for which the sixth Guru was making preparations was exemplified when he took to wearing two swords, symbolizing both. One sword was of *Miri* (worldly) and the other of *Piri* (Spiritual)⁷. From the time of Guru Hargobind, the Sikhs emerged as a military force and from this point onwards, they always had an armed and well trained fighting force at their disposal⁸. Guru Hargobind “established a tradition that which changed the ideology of the Sikhs and Sikhism forever”⁹.

The execution of his father affected the tenth Guru and his heir Gobind Singh profoundly¹⁰. The role played by the tenth Sikh Guru and the last individual and personal embodiment of the Guru is seminal in the development of Sikhs as a martial community¹¹. Guru Gobind Singh, through a reasoned and planned progression had raised the power and prestige of the *Khalsa* to equal that of the personal Guru during his own lifetime¹².

² Rudyard Kipling was an imperialist and supporter of Colonialism, who was known for endorsing such ideas as ‘The Whiteman’s burden’. Also read Brantlinger, P. (2007). Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" and Its Afterlives. *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 50(2), 172-191. doi:10.1353/elt.2007.0017.

³ Panesar, Amerdeep Singh (2017) *Martialing the Sikh Soldier During the First World War*. Masters thesis, University of Huddersfield.

⁴ McLeod, Hew (1987). "Sikhs and Muslims in the Punjab". *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*. 22 (s1): 155–165.

⁵ HS Syan (2013), *Sikh Militancy in the Seventeenth Century*, IB Tauris, ISBN 978-1780762500, pages 48–55

⁶ Patwant Singh (2000) *The Sikhs*. Knopf pp 40 ISBN 0375407286

⁷ Mahmood, Cynthia (2002). *A Sea of Orange*. United States: Xlibris. p. 16.

⁸ Fauja Singh (2009). "HARGOBIND, GURU (1595–1644)". *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*. Punjabi University, Patiala. Retrieved January 3, 2021.

⁹ Patwant Singh (2000) *The Sikhs*. Knopf PP 42 ISBN 0375407286

¹⁰ Ganda Singh. "GOBIND SINGH, GURU (1666-1708)" *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*. Punjabi University Patiala. Archived from the original on 29 July 2017. Retrieved 7 March 2016.

¹¹ Seiple, Chris (2013). *The Routledge handbook of religion and security*. New York: Routledge. p. 96..

¹² Harjot Oberoi (1994). *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*. University of Chicago Press. pp. 59–62.

The distinction between the Sikhs and Singhs

It is important to understand that there was a clear distinction between the Sikhs and Singhs. The Singhs were the militarised Sikhs who had been baptised in the tradition of the Khalsa¹³, and who wore the five emblems of the Khalsa¹⁴ as advocated by Guru Gobind Singh on the fateful Baisakhi Day of 1699¹⁵. At the death of Guru Gobind Singh, all the Sikhs had still not become Singhs and vice versa. It was only after his death¹⁶, during the dark days¹⁷ when his followers faced unprecedented persecution at the hands of the Mughals and Afghans did the difference between the Sikhs and Singhs eventually merge¹⁸ and the two terms become interchangeable and synonymous¹⁹.

Richard Fox, in common with other scholars such as William McLeod²⁰, Pashaura Singh²¹ and E Fenech uses the label ‘Sikh’ in a far wider sense to denote the diversity of identities and observances, customs and belief systems that were followed by those purporting to be Sikhs. The identity of the ‘Singh’ is reserved for the special warrior-saint-soldier-martyr identity that was first created by Guru Gobind Singh and was then sustained by Maharaja Ranjeet Singh. He nurtured this identity actively in the form of the special attention he gave to his Akali battalions who perpetuated the ‘Singh’ identity as propounded by Guru Gobind Singh most closely. This very same identity was actively fostered by the British when they experienced the mettle of the Singhs in real time combat during the two Anglo Sikh wars.

Post annexation, the Singhs (inheritors and upholders of the soldier-saint-warrior-martyr identity) were in imminent danger of elimination as it lay in the British interests to subsume their martial identity and integrate them into the mass of rural peasantry. The integration of the Singhs’ into the larger peasantry, and the dilution of their martial identity would have destroyed the threat and danger which the Singhs represented to the British.

Singhs as Sikh soldiers of the British Army

In his work, *Lions of the Punjab*, anthropologist Richard Fox²² gives a biological analogy for the Singhs of the Punjab. Singh, literally translated as lions, is the biological analogy which Fox attributes to the Sikhs of the Punjab to arrive at a better conception of culture. He justifies the use of the analogy of the Lions as a

¹³ Harjot Oberoi (1994). *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*. University of Chicago Press. pp. 59–62.

¹⁴ Cole, W. Owen; Sambhi, Piara Singh (1978). *The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. Routledge. p. 37

¹⁵ John M Koller (2016). *The Indian Way: An Introduction to the Philosophies & Religions of India*. Routledge. pp. 312–313.

¹⁶ P Dhavan (2011). *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699-1799*. Oxford University Press. pp. 45–46.

¹⁷ Singh, Prithi Pal (15 September 2007). *The history of Sikh Gurus*. Lotus Press. p. 158.

¹⁸ Hardip Singh Syan (2013). *Sikh Militancy in the Seventeenth Century: Religious Violence in Mughal and Early Modern India*. I.B.Tauris. pp. 229-234

¹⁹ Grewal, J. S. (1994) *The Sikhs of the Punjab*. Cambridge University Press, Foundation Books, New Delhi 2002, pg 88

²⁰ McLeod, William H. 1968. *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

²¹ Singh, Pashaura. 2014. *Gurmat: The Teachings of the Gurus*. In *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 225–39

²² Richard G Fox (1985) *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the making*, Berkeley; University of California Press

reference to the British orientations and policies and the manner in which they were able to use this identity of the Sikhs to ‘master’ and ‘use’ them.

Fox apprises the readers of the British belief that the religious community of the Sikhs were separate and unique. As per the anthropological beliefs prevailing at the time, the Sikh’s physical characteristics of being taller in height and stronger in physique, the distinctive region of their living that was climatically suited to produce a hardier and stalwart species of men and women with special behaviours such as impulsive courage and unique appearance owing to turban and uncut beards all made them a different race with martial characteristics.

The colonial mindset about ‘orientalism’ and ‘biological determinism’ instilled the belief among the British that racial superiority and inferiority was a reality, and they tried hard to get the Sikhs to believe that they were a different species and race too. This idea gained currency and became strongly entrenched when the British adopted specific policies and selective processes to force the Sikhs to maintain their ‘racial martial’ traditions. The Singhs in turn, internalised this cultural concept and started to believe firmly in this imposed British cultural reconstruction.

Lion of the Punjab- Maharaja Ranjeet Singh

Ranjeet Singh was the son of one of the twelve *misdars* from the Sukerchakia *misl* who were holding sway over parts of the Punjab at the time²³. The credit for consolidating and absorbing the diverse *misls* which were being ruled by different Sikh chiefs and a muslim and were constantly engaged in internecine warfare goes to this young Sardar²⁴. He was the creator of the formidable Khalsa Army whose writ ran from the frontiers of the Khyber to Kashmir to the Sutluj²⁵. He was a modern ruler, with an enlightened and sagacious mind that was alive to possibilities as well as the challenges that faced the Sikh empire he had established in the North of India²⁶.

Anglo Sikh Wars

It was in the two Anglo Sikh wars that the British experienced the mettle of the Sikh soldiers at first hand... and were stunned.

In the First Anglo Sikh War, in the Battle of Pherozeshah, the second of the war, in the words of Cunningham, the Political Agent of the East India Company, on the morning of Decemeber 21, 1845, the scene was²⁷,

²³ Kushwant Singh. "RANJIT SINGH (1780–1839)". *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*. Punjabi University Patiala. Retrieved 18 August 2015.

²⁴ Patwant Singh (2008). *Empire of the Sikhs: The Life and Times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*. Peter Owen. pp. 113–124.

²⁵ Jean Marie Lafont (2002). *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Lord of the Five Rivers*. Oxford University Press. 15–16.

²⁶ Kaushik Roy (2011). *War, Culture and Society in Early Modern South Asia, 1740–1849*. Routledge. pp. 143–147.

²⁷ Cunningham, J.D. (1848) *History of the Sikhs* Reprint by Rupa Paperback 2002, Eleventh Impression 2012, New Delhi

“The British had at last got the field they wanted... (but) the resistance met was wholly unexpected... the obstinacy of the contest threw the English into confusion; men of all regiments and arms were mixed together; Generals were doubtful of the fact or the extent of their own success, and Colonels knew not what had become of the regiments they commanded or of the army of which they formed a part”.

The last battle of the Anglo Sikh wars was at Gujrat where, “never perhaps had the British amassed so many guns and men in any single battle”. 56,636 infantry, 11,569 cavalry, 96 field guns and 67 siege guns were amassed, facing a Sikh force of about 20,000 men. The victory against such overwhelming odds was still hard won, as the Sikhs fought with ferocity and valour, without disregard for life or limb, as they always did and the ‘curtain came down on Ranjit Singh’s proud empire’²⁸.

The Sikh soldier was particularly deadly at close quarters, and was skilled and fearless when it came to hand to hand combat²⁹.

The Martial Race Theory

The Martial race theory contributed in a large measure to the self-identification of the Sikh soldier and it needs to be looked at carefully. The martial race theory had such a wide acceptance at one time that it dominated the military mind completely, especially in India. One of the chapters in this proposed research work shall try to evaluate the Martial race theory to explain the high degree of motivation and willingness to die for the British cause which the soldiers displayed and try to seek its reasons and background. It was also one of the overriding factors why the region for recruitment post 1857, for the British Indian Army became primarily the Punjab. Overwhelming recruitment from this region led to what has been termed as the ‘Punjabisation’³⁰ of the British Indian army.

The evolution of the Martial Race Theory

The British understood early on that in a deeply conservative, strictly hierarchical and moribund society such as India, it was vital that ‘the forging of a martial identity’ should be synchronous with ‘collective solidarity and sense of purpose’³¹, and this would be easier to engender in a body of men who were already united by clan, community, religion and caste. Once this identity was engendered, it had to be fostered and strengthened. This was possible through the maintenance of martial distinction, building up of a distinctive identity, leadership of inspiring officers and regimental and unit glorification to foster pride and close affiliation with the unit.

²⁸ Patwant Singh (2000) *The Sikhs*. Pp 158 Knopf PP 172 ISBN 0375407286

²⁹ Saggi VSM, D.S (7 Jun 2018). *Battle Tactics And War Manoeuvres of the Sikhs*. Notion Press.

³⁰ Syed Hussain Soherwardi (2005) *Punjabisation in the British Army 1857-1947 and the advent of Military rule in Pakistan*, University of Edinburgh. Punjabisation refers to the large scale recruitment that happened for the British Indian Army from the Punjab, making it the predominant regions where the

³¹ Rob Johnson (ed) 2014 *The British Army: Virtue and Necessity* pg 3

Sikhs, according to Warren Hastings in 1784, are "eminently fit for the military career" due to their "body frame and habits of life"³². The creation of the Khalsa, a religious order established by the 10th Guru of Sikhism Guru Gobind Singh, whose task was to protect the religion, is related to the representation of Sikhs as warriors³³. Importantly, its position was romanticised as a valiant army fighting Mughal oppression and it is this impression that is ingrained in Sikh culture.

According to Purnima Dhavan, the creation of the Khalsa should be viewed as a multifaceted organisation rather than a strictly religious one³⁴. Despite the political motivations, the colonial government shared the vision of codifying Sikhism in order to revive the faith. According to Ballantyne³⁵, this was due to supposed parallels between Sikhism and the British, which contributed to the identification of Sikhism as rational in comparison to other parts of the Indian population who rebelled in 1857. It was profitable on both sides to integrate Sikhs into the British Raj³⁶.

Circumstances leading to the Martial Race Theory

After the revolt of 1857, which shook the British Empire in India right down to its very roots, the British administrators and powers that be were forced to pause and re-evaluate everything concerning their Indian Empire. The decision makers in London, right from the Queen to Parliament and in India, took a hard look at the realities that were revealed by what was termed by the English as a mere 'sepoy mutiny'. There was the need to evaluate the reasons and causes that had led to the outbreak across many parts of the India and put systems in place which would prevent the reoccurrence of such an event³⁷. The experiences, observations, events, stories, and assessments made by the British during the days of the revolt of 1857³⁸ and the connections of trust formed between the soldiers (British and Indian) in those trying days. As Heather Street writes in her book,

Three groups of soldiers who came to be feted above all others as representatives of collective heroism were the Highland Scots, Punjabi Sikhs and Nepali Gurkhas. Stories that celebrated their valour, ferocity and gallantry articulated new connections between British soldiers and the most

³² Amandeep Singh Madra, Parmjit Singh (2004) *Sicques, Tigers, or Thieves?": Eyewitness Accounts of the Sikhs (1606–1809)*. Palgrave Macmillan US, ISBN : 978-1-4039-6202-7

³³ Grewal, Jagtar Singh. 1998. *Sikh Identity, the Akalis and Khalistan*. In *Punjab in Prosperity and Violence*. Edited by Jagtar Singh Grewal and Indu Banga. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, pp. 65–103.

³⁴ Dhavan, Purnima (2011) *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699–1799*. Oxford University Press, New York

³⁵ Tony Ballantyne (2006) *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World*. Durham / London: Duke University Press.

³⁶ Singh, Khushwant (1966) *A History of the Sikhs, Vol 2* Princeton, N. J.

³⁷ Smith, R. Bosworth (1883) *Life of Lord Lawrence, Vols 2*, London

³⁸ Streets. Heather. (2004) *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* Manchester University Press

loyal Indian soldiers, and between military service in the empire, ideal masculinity and racial superiority³⁹.

Interestingly Warren Hastings had predicted that local traditions and caste affiliations must be absorbed, upheld and strengthened as they would 'prevent the danger that (Indians) would be united and embodied as an armed nation after the example of the Sikhs... and become too formidable for their rulers'⁴⁰.

The issue was the Russian Empire's expansion, which had landed just 400 miles from Punjab⁴¹. The threats to India were geographically bound, which explains why position became a factor in martial race thought. The Eden Commission was formed in 1879 to reassess the army in light of the new problems that the Raj was facing. As a result of these emerging challenges, the recruitment priority was moved to North India. Around this time, the idea of enlisting the aid of martial races started to gain momentum. The Bengal army was 44 percent Punjabi before the Commission, in 1875, so this change was already underway.⁴²

In 1895, when the Indian army was reorganised and the presidency Armies were dissolved to create a single unified Indian Army with four regional commands. Another strong factor that influenced the re-evaluation of the Military Recruitment and formation of the Martial Race Theory was the rise of the continental powers such as Russia, Germany, France, Belgium, Portugal and Netherlands. With the race for colonies started a contest for having the most dependable, strong and effective military machine to support the global expansion aspirations of these major European powers.

Some writers also opine that the recruitment of the Sikhs in large numbers was reluctant and made necessary by the fact that owing to the Sepoy mutiny of 1857, they were finding it difficult to recruit men for army from the regions which had fallen under the hands of the mutineers. Every man from Oudh was a suspect⁴³.

Hence, the Martial race theory was the consequence of several factors at full play, and newly emergent socio-political and ideological realities in the 1870's. The Martial Race theory as it evolved was largely artificial construction, combined various distinct beliefs and practises as observed by the British in the Indian territories they had conquered. As the area under the British hegemony increased, so did the diversity of races, communities, regional social systems and distinctions that the British had to contend with, in their struggle to not only subjugate, but also later, manage and repress the huge sub continent under their control.

³⁹ Streets. Heather. (2004) *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* Manchester University Press

⁴⁰ Rob Jonson (ed) 2014 *The british Army: Virtue and Necessity* pg 5

⁴¹ (Mazumder, 2004).

⁴² (Ballantyne, 2006).

⁴³ A. L Basham () *The Untouchables The Maharas and Mazabi*

General Fredrick Roberts and the Martial Races

The main and most influential proponent of the Martial race Theory was General Fredrick Roberts. He actually ‘just systemised and publicised the various strands of ideas about the martial races that were already in vogue’⁴⁴. Roberts believed that the ‘Wheat eating small peasants and communities inhabiting the cold frontier regions were martial...’ as the heat of India resulted in the degeneration of the martial capabilities’⁴⁵.

This was the time when the veracity of the martial race recruitment started gaining full clarity and justification in General Roberts mind as the only viable alternative if the British Indian empire was to be saved from conquest by the Russians.⁴⁶ The Peel Commissions recommendations advocating the balancing of the three Presidency Armies was also irrelevant by this time in the 1880’s as the functions of the Army itself had transformed, in the wake of the European (Russian) threat to India⁴⁷.

The Sikhs were highly mindful and grateful for Lord Roberts recognition as martial races. In the farewell address by the Sikhs of Lahore to Lord Roberts at his departure from India in 1893,

“The Sikhs, in particular are, more than any other community in India, indebted to your Lordship...Your Excellency was the first to see the Sikhs refined and educated by establishing a Central College in the Punjab for use of the Sikh people⁴⁸.”

Already by 1914, Punjab contributed about half of the total Armed Forces in India and during the war, it was to be the preferred hunting ground for more recruits⁴⁹.

Conclusion

An analytical analysis of the writings and views of the earliest British observers of the Sikhs, to 1947, when the British finally departed India, there are certain beliefs and perceptions that remained true and which are not difficult to discern. The perception of the Sikhs in British eyes rested on certain fundamental beliefs which they had formed on the basis of their observation of the Sikhs⁵⁰.

⁴⁴ ROY, K. (2013). Race and Recruitment in the Indian Army: 1880– 1918. *Modern Asian Studies*, 47(4), 1310-1347. Retrieved March 24, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24494199>

⁴⁵ Field Marshall Lord Roberts of Kandahar (1897, reprinted New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2005) Forty One years in India: from Subaltern to Commander-in-chief, London, p 532

⁴⁶ Streets. Heather. (2004) *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* Manchester University Press and

⁴⁷ Farewell, Byron (1989) *Armies of the Raj: From the Mutiny to Independence, 1858-1947*, W.W Norton & Company: New York

⁴⁸ Roberts, Forty One Years, Appendix XII Address of the Sikhs of Punjab to Lord Roberts on his visit to Lahore before his departure from India, pg 568

⁴⁹ (Talbot, 1988, p 46; Van Koski, 1995, p 59; Omissi, 1999, p 356; Tan, 2000, p 376; Streets, 2004, p 100)

⁵⁰ Grewal, Jagtar Singh. (2011) *History, Literature, and Identity: Four Centuries of Sikh Tradition*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

The creation of this unique identity and its active fostering worked both ways. This fastidious adherence to a Sikh identity was successful in furthering British policy of 'divide and rule' too, in a systematic and organised way within the army, which was one of the primary instruments of power and control in the British colonial Raj⁵¹. In its 'downward' manifestation, this fostered a sharp 'differentiation' between the Sikh soldiers and their counterparts from other regions and communities in the army, thereby creating marked distinctions that prevented the formation and development of any national consciousness and kept the army divided and segmented, even while India was being swept in the waves of nationalism and national consciousness was developing fast in the urban and rural areas in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The cantonments continued to be pacific harbours of tranquillity, while the civil population of the country underwent rapid nationalistic awakening.

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⁵¹ Richard Fox. (1985) *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the making* Berkeley: University of California Press., xvii, 259 pp.

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