The Great Rebellion of 1857 and the Birth of a New Identity of the Sikhs of the Punjab

This paper attempts an explanation of why the Sikhs of the land of the five rivers had a different perception of the rebellion of 1857 and did not develop a feeling of kinship to the clarion call from the heartland of Hindustan for the Hindus and Musalmans of Hindustan to unite against the Goras (white skinned people) and overthrow their rule. The Sikhs had made their appearance in the grand narrative of Indian history as a force opposed to the dictates from the heartland of India. Their survival as a distinct religious entity and a force to be reckoned with in their present habitat had to be won in opposition to the forces prevalent in the heartland of Hindustan the cost of an immense sacrifice. The last heroic resistance of the Sikhs to the British orchestrated by the leadership of Diwan Mulraj of Multan, Chulter Singh Attariwala, Raja Sher Singh and Bhai Maharaj Singh during the second Sikh war of 1848-49 had broken on the bayonets of the collaborating Hindustan armies in the train of the British. In 1857 the erstwhile Sikh strong holds in the manjha or central Punjab districts were still being held in subjection by the British with the help of the armies brought by the British from the eastern parts of their empire. The caste card played by the British in building up this army had suddenly boomeranged on the British in 1857. But the British still had the intellectual resources to play that caste card once again in their newly acquired province of Punjab and win a close shave in the risky game of keeping an empire in a foreign land. The Sikhs, on their part, saw very little choice between the two stools of the imperialism of the British and the “sub imperialism” of their Hindustani collaborators. 1857 presented the Sikhs with an opportunity to retrieve their lost status and their way of life as part of a militia which they had to surrender to their Hindustani counterparts very gradually since 1846 and finally and absolutely since 1848-49. The Sikhs lost no time to make use of this opportunity to capture their lost position and by 1911 they commanded twenty percent of the total number of Indians in the military service of the British in India when they formed only one percent of the total population of India.
When Jawaharlal Nehru had spoken of a “lack of nationalist feeling which might have bound the people of India together” hinting at the assistance rendered by the Sikhs to the British in winning back Delhi from the mutineers in 1857\(^1\) he displayed a peculiar insensitivity to the Sikh psyche and the history of the rise of the Sikhs. The Sikh “nation”\(^2\) could carve out a place for itself only in opposition to the forces arising out of the “heartland”\(^3\) of India and they had to hold their own at the cost of many lives and countless number of privations. History is replete with instances of the persecution of the Sikhs by the Mughal rulers of subah Lahore, beginning with the martyrdom in\(^4\) 1606 of Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru of the Sikhs during the reign of Emperor Jehangir. The list gradually swelled with gorier and gorier acts of violence and cruelty like the beheading of Teg Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru in the court of Emperor Aurangzeb in Delhi in 1675; the treacherous killing of Ajit Singh and Jijhar Singh, the two elder sons of the tenth Sikh Guru Govind Singh, who were only seventeen and fourteen respectively, during the defence of the fort of Chamkaur, when the Sikhs opened the gates of the fort on the written promise of the Mughal general that there would be no violence; the construction of brick walls around the other two infant sons of Guru Govind Singh, Zorawar Singh and Fateh Singh, aged only eight and six who had been kept along with their grandmother, Mata Gujri, in the custody of a Bramhin, Gangu, who betrayed them to the Governor of Sirhind. The boys valiantly chose death to conversion and were buried alive under brick walls. Banda Singh Bahadur, the Sikh leader succeeding Guru Govind Singh took possession of Sirhind and carried vengeance into the heart of the Mughal Empire right up to Saharanpur. When finally he was captured in 1716, his body was pierced down the middle by an iron saw and several hundreds of his followers were similarly put to a violent death.\(^5\) The “people’s war”\(^6\) carried on by the Sikh misls\(^7\) in the

2. Indu Bhusan Banerjee, *The Evolution of The Khalsa* (Calcutta 1979) vol 1
3. For the concept of a Hindustani heartland see Gyanesh Kudasiya, *Region, Nation and “Heartland”*: Uttar Pradesh in India’s Body Politic (Sage 2006)
area from Lahore to Sirhind, continued to be challenged by the Mughals as well as the Afghan invader Ahmad Shah Abdali which culminated in the “Wadha Gullu Ghara” or the big holocaust when 22,000 Sikhs were slain in a place near the Kup Rahira village, east of Malerkotta where they had been harassing Zain Khan, the Afghan Governor of Sirhind. An extract from the *ardas* or morning and evening prayer of the Sikhs can give an insight into the poignance of Sikh feelings for the valour of the martyrs who laid down their lives for their faith and those responsible for such gruesome fate of these stalwarts –

“ The Sikh men and women who gave their heads for their religion
Whose limbs were cut off one by one,
Who were scalped, broken on the wheel, and sawn in pieces who sacrificed their lives to save the gurudwaras, their faith triumphed.
They served the Sikh religion with uncut hair to their last breath,
Remember their steadfast faith, Khalsaji.
Proclaim: Vaheguru, the wonderful Guru!”

Thus the relationship of the Sikhs with the forces from the heartland of India had since a long time been conflicting and antagonistic, which led Ratan Singh Bhangu, the author of *Prachin Panth Prakash* to remark that –

“ The relationship of Sikhs and Turks


9. “Itihas Singha Singhania ne dharm het sis dite
    band band kataye, khoprian, buhaiyan
    Charkhadiyan te chadhe
    Tan ariya nal chiraye, gardaniyan di seha layi
    kurbaniyan kitan, dharam nahi hariyan
    sikhin kosan suasan nal nibahi
tinhan di kamayi da dhian dhar ke khalsaji
    Bolo ji Vahi Guru.”
Is like that of a dagger and a knife
Or like fire and water.”

Moreover, whatever feelings of collective belonging or “popular proto-nationalism”, to use a phrase from Eric Hobsbawm11 had developed among the Sikhs at this time from inhabiting a common territory, sharing a common language, revering the same religion and above all from the apprehension of a common danger from the Mughal state in the shape in the shape of the levy of a higher demand for land revenue12 – it must have been something parallel to, if not downright opposed to the evolution of a feeling of ‘Hindiyat’, embracing three different identities — Hindustan, Hindu and Muslim13 in the ‘heartland’ of India. Many observers thought that like many other obscure religious sects, the Sikhs too would have passed into oblivion and insignificance but for the persecution of the Mughals. It was the need to resist the political encroachments of the Mughals accompanied by religious persecution which brought out the finer aspects of the character of the Sikhs into focus. “ Assuming the tenets of a faith, associated in their memories with deeds of vengeance upon the Mahometan and successful resistance against the oppressor”, as R.N. Cust remarked, “they converted the country between the rivers Ravi and Jumna into a theatre for the struggle of a nation fighting for its liberty.”

Punjab had not been won from the Sikhs without any resistance. In the summer of 1848 the Sikh Sardars had determined to make a last ditch effort to drive out the ‘Feringhees’ from the soil of Punjab. In Mooltan Diwan Moolraj’s men had cut down Mr. Agnew and Mr. Anderson, the English officers who had gone to take charge of the administration of Multan, their native escorts (a regiment infantry, some cavalry and eighty artillerymen with guns) siding with the insurgents. Moolraj was strengthened much further with the flocking of disbanded Khalsa soldiers under his command.

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10. mel turkan sang khalse ka hon aise, kakri chhuri ka jaise jal te angarian
14. R.N. Cust, ‘The Religions of India’ in Linguistic and Oriental Essays written from the year 1846 to 1878 (London 1880) PP. 107-143
The delay in British action, anticipating the rains by June 10 which would swell the rivers and bring an unusual number of casualties in the pursuit of the rebels, encouraged them yet more. Moolraj moved against Lieutenant Edwardes to the west of the Indus. The British cause was endangered by an insurrection in Hazara at this time. Raja Shera Singh’s forces joined those of Chattar Singh Attariwala and a revolt by the Sikh army at Bunnoo swelled their ranks.  

Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General summed up the situation as —

“ The spirit of the whole Sikh people was inflamed by the bitterest animosity against us — when chief after chief deserted our cause, until nearly the whole army led by the Sirdars who had signed the treaties and by the Members of the Council of Regency itself, was openly arrayed against us – when above it all, it was seen that the Sikhs, in their eagerness for our destruction, had even combined in unnatural alliance with Dost Mahomed Khan and his Mahomedan tribes.”

The British could not begin action till November and had to lose two generals, Cureton and Havelock before they crossed the Chenab in pursuit of the rebels. Four fierce battles were fought at Ramnuggur, Aliwal, Sobroan and Chillianwala, the British succeeding in Attock through an act of treachery in the enemy camp.

The armed encounters with the Sikhs brought home to the British that they had met their equals in battle. “We began the campaign”, said John Lawrence, “as we have begun every campaign in India before and since, by despising our foes; but we had hardly begun it before we learned to respect them."

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16. Dost Mahomed Khan was the ruler of Afghanistan.
17. Dalhousie to Sir George Cooper, April 18, 1848 in J.G.A. Baird, Private Letters of the Marquess of Dalhousie op.cit.
18. R. Bosworth Smith, Life of Lord Lawrence, vol. 1 (London Smith, Elder and Co., 1883) P. 212
Lawrence was full of praise for such military rivals, calling them “the bravest, the most determined, and the most formidable whom we have ever met in India”, \(^{19}\) which prompted his biographer Bosworth Smith to call them “our half-victorious enemies of Chillianwala”. \(^ {20}\)

The surrender of the Khalsa army after the battle of Gujrat on February 21, 1849 had to be followed by their demobilization. It was not merely a question of switching from soldiering into farming and “beating the swords into plough shares and spears into pruning hooks”. \(^{21}\) With their livelihood was gone an entire way of life. Edwin Arnold’s moving description of the de-militarization of the Khalsa army would provide a key to the emotional turmoil going on in the heart of the demobilized soldier – “With noble self-restraint, thirty five chiefs laid down their swords at Gilbert’s feet, while the Sikh soldiers, advancing one by one, to the file of the English drawn across the road, flung down tulwar, matchlock and shield upon the growing heap of arms, salaamed to them as to the “spirit of the steel” and passed through the open line, no longer soldiers……. Each horseman among them had to part for the last time from the animal which he regarded as part of himself – from the gallant charger which had borne him in safety in many an irresistible charge over many a battlefield. This was too much even for Sikh endurance. He caressed and patted his faithful companion on every part of his body, and then turned resolutely away. But his resolution failed him. He turned back again and again to give one caress more and then, as he tore himself away for the very last time, brushed a tear drop fro his eye, and exclaimed, ……. ’Runjeet Singh is dead today’. \(^ {22}\)

Like his Hindustani counterpart in the pay of the British, the manjha Sikh soldier of the Khalsa commonwealth must have commanded a highly respected position in the village of his origin. His military earnings could supplement the investments in the land of his biraderi, apart from easing the pressure on land. The entry of additional funds in the village economy sends its multiplier effects on all sections of

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
\(^{20}\) Ibid. P335
\(^{21}\) Ibid. P281
\(^{22}\) Edwin Arnold, *Marquis of Dalhousie’s Administration of British India* quoted y B. Smith , Life of Lrd Lawrence, P. 275 op. cit.
people related to the economy and brought prosperity to the villages. Christopher Bayly’s work has traced how military finance and military expenditure dictate the agrarian and artisanal production in the economy of the quasba and the ganj and this impinge upon the civil society of the neighbourhood.\textsuperscript{23} So numerousness were the recipients of the distributive system that an end to the military vocation of the members of the village community would spell immense hardships for their economy, resulting in a funds crunch in all parts of it. The return of the dismissed soldiers back to their villages would result in an unusually heavy burden on the available quantity of cultivable land and diminish their per capita shares. To this was added the plight of low prices for agricultural products in the wake of a plentiful harvest and a glut in the grain market in the rabi (spring harvest) season of 1849-50.\textsuperscript{24}

For all this decline in their status as well as their fortunes, the Sikhs blamed the invading Hindustani armies from the east whom they contemptuously termed as the ‘Poorbeahs’ or people from the east from the Hindoostani word ‘Poorub’ signifying east. This name was in wide prevalence in the Khalsa army of Ranjit Singh to indicate people living to the east of the sacred river, the Ganges, like Awadh and Bihar, which served as the major recruiting centres for the Bengal army. Some of these men had entered the ranks of the Khalsa army after discharge or desertion from the East India Company’s service and were looked upon with great scorn by the Sikh soldiers.\textsuperscript{25} Their mutual recriminations deteriorated after the annexation of Punjab to the British Empire which brought up the question of recruiting the Sikhs in the Bengal Army. Although there was no legal or political bar to such recruitment, the idea did not find much favour with the commanding officers who were familiar with the caste prejudices of their subalterns.\textsuperscript{26} Seema Alavi has taken a look at the way Warren Hastings had tried to keep alive the caste differentiations in army recruitment to preempt the possibility of a combination against the rulers by their subalterns. Military recruitment in northern India had always been the pressure of high caste men like Bramhins and Chhattri Rajputs or

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\textsuperscript{23}Christopher Bayly,\textit{ Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars} (Cambridge, 1983)  \\
\textsuperscript{24} Punjaban Administration Report 1849-50  \\
\textsuperscript{25} Reverend J. Care- Browne,\textit{ The Punjab and Delhi in 1857} Being a Narrative of the Measures by which the Punjab was saved and Delhi recovered during the Mutiny (William Blackwood and Sons, London 1861) Preface  \\
\end{flushright}
Pathans and Afghans. The East India Company was particularly careful to respect their
dietary habits or their ideas of commensality.\textsuperscript{27} Thus these high-caste army recruits, when
confronted with the question of admitting Sikhs to their ranks, reacted rather hysterically.
Seema Alavi quotes Pandit Kanhyalal to suggest that this reaction on grounds of caste
also concealed a fear of new recipients of the company’s favours, which were now being
denied to them.\textsuperscript{28} One of the major reasons why the company decided in favour of filling
up of twenty percent of the company’s army with recruits from among the Sikhs was to
be able to cut down on the company’s expenditure on account of the special allowances
admissible to the recruits in the Bengal Army for serving in foreign land. (which was
applicable to Punjab before its annexation) The memoirs of Sita Ram, a Rajput sepoy
from Awadh, who had served in the Bengal Army during the campaigns in the Punjab,
also refer to the difficulties caused by the inclusion of Sikh soldiers in his regiment soon
after the Sikh wars.\textsuperscript{29} The high caste rhetoric formulated by the company during the
recruitment in their older provinces could not simply be wished away and the Hindu
sepoys from Awadh and Rohilkhand began to despise the Sikhs as “untidy and dirty”
because of their non-bramhin origins.\textsuperscript{30}

The arrival of the Hindustanis in the Punjab in the train
of the British was not likely to be taken kindly by the Sikhs, who were held in subjection
only through the presence of a large number of Hindustani regiments. When Delhi fell
before the mutineers in 1857, the number of native troops of the Bengal Army in the
Punjab was 36,000.\textsuperscript{31} The collection of land revenue and the administration of the law
was also in the hands of the Hindustani officials.\textsuperscript{32} It was therefore only natural for the
“turbulent, enthusiastic and fanatical”\textsuperscript{33} people of the Punjab to get impatient with the

\textsuperscript{27} Seema Alavi, \textit{The Sepoys and the Company}; Tradition and Transition in Northern India 1770- 1830 (O.U.P. 1995)
\textsuperscript{29} Sita Ram, \textit{From Sepoy to Subahdar} : Being the Life and Adventures of a Native Officer of the Bengal Army, written and Related by Himself, translated by Lt Colonel Norgate and ed. Lt. Col. D.C. Philliot (Calcutta,1911)
\textsuperscript{30} op. cit. Tan Tai Yong, \textit{The Garrison State} PP 38-39.
\textsuperscript{31} Michael Edwardes, \textit{The Necessary Hell: John and Henry Lawrence and the Indian Empire} (Cassel, London, 1958) P. 160
\textsuperscript{33} op. cit. Bosworth Smith, vol. 1, P212
“sub-imperialism”34 of the trespassers from the east.

These mutual hostilities of the ‘Purbeahs’ and the Punjabis played into the hands of the British, who found it advantageous to keep such jealousies alive. They were pathetically aware of the weak and fragile nature of their domination in a foreign land. It was therefore in their interest to keep these animosities alive. As Reverend Care-Browne, the chaplain of the Movable Column in 1857 put it, “in their jealous rivalry lay our security” 35 The British therefore continued to make studied efforts to keep the Punjabis and the purbeas in mutual check and “to counterbalance race by race and creed by creed.”36

Playing upon the mutual hatred of the Purbeas and the Punjabis had been the trump card of the British from the very moment that the telegraph lines began to flash the news of the outbreak at Meerut on the 10th of May, 1857 and the fall of Delhi in the hands of the mutineers soon after. Among the very first set of instructions emanating from the chief commissioner John Lawrence in the hour of crisis to the district commissioners was a mandate to trace the Sikh chiefs in their respective districts and “to enlist their martial instincts and their natural hatred of the Hindustanis.”37 There were 58,000 trained native troops in the Punjab of whom 36,000 were men of the Bengal Army, “each a potential mutineer”, as against 10,500 European troops dispersed into two sensitive borders – at Peshawar and in the Simla Hills with a few weak outposts in between. 38 It is with such slender resources that the British had to turn the scales against the mutineers and it required some unique strategy to turn this impossible into possible.

Immediately after the annexation of the Punjab, John Lawrence was not sure if he should recruit the old Sikhs. He said “I recollect their

34. Andrew J. Major, Return to Empire : Punjab Under the Sikhs and the British in the Mid-Nineteenth Century (Sterling, New Delhi, 1996)
35. op. cit. Care-Browne, The Punjab and Delhi in 1857, P. 104
36. Ibid.
37. op. cit. Bosworth Smith The Life of Lord Lawrence vol. II P.42
38. op. cit. Michael Edwardes, The Necessary Hell P.160
strong nationalities\(^{39}\) by which he must have meant their strong feelings of nationalism. The news of the mutiny was thus immediately followed up by the arrest of the old Sikh leaders like Bhai Maharaj Singh, who was away in a village, 16 miles from Amritsar\(^{40}\). The other important leaders, Chutter Singh and Sher Singh, who had been allowed to reside in their old homes in Attari were also looked upon with suspicion, especially because of their reported enthusiasm about feeding Bramhins and Khuttris. “Brahmins and barbers”, reported John Lawrence to Dalhousie, “the two classes of people who are usually engaged in all kinds of intrigues, have been repeatedly seen at Attari”.\(^{41}\) Messages were suspected to have been exchanged between Attari, Sealkote and Amritsar, which had been the home of the other fallen Sikh Sirdars. They were also thought to be having links with Golab Singh of Kashmir and Dost Mohammed of Kabul. To preempt the possibility of another uprising, Attari was surrounded with troops which took custody of Chutter Singh, Sher Singh, their sons and other potential rebel Sirdars and they were safely packed out of Punjab to an exile in Calcutta. The outbreak of the mutiny therefore found Punjab denuded of all potential rebel leadership.

Yet John Lawrence’s 23 July decision to write the Sikh chiefs, those who had lost their positions and prestige in 1848, to come and contribute their forces to the English and rehabilitate themselves in the eyes of their new masters must have originated from an extreme crisis of manpower. As the few European generals were sent, one by one, to retrieve Delhi, the province was being left absolutely defenceless. It is possible to imagine the darkness of despair encircling John Lawrence from a subsequent letter to Dalhousie – “If Delhi had not fallen, we must have been ruined. Had the troops retreated, all must have been lost. Had indeed the storming not succeeded, all must have gone”\(^{42}\). John Lawrence was playing on very high stakes. But his strategy answered.

\(^{39}\) op. cit. Bosworth Smith, Life of Lord Lawrence
\(^{40}\) F.H. Cooper, Dep. Com. Umrtsur to A.A. Roberts, Com and Sup., Lahore Division 19\(^{th}\) February, 1858 in Mutiny Reports Records vol. VIII collection 2
\(^{41}\) op. cit. Bosworth Smith p333
\(^{42}\) John Lawrence to Dalhousie, January 14, 1858 in op. cit. Michael Edwardes, The Necessary Hell p.175
Lawrence’s biographer mentions one Nihal Singh Chachi, the aide-de-camp who advised him on these measures at this crucial juncture. Nihal Singh could read the mind of the Sikhs at this time. “Being a native”, as Bosworth Smith rightly remarked, “he would be able to penetrate behind that impenetrable veil which, unfortunately still separates the vast majority of our countrymen from those whom they rule.”  

John Lawrence was being pressed for gunners and artillery men for sending reinforcements to Delhi and he thought it a good gamble to rely on the advice of Nihal Singh that “You had better employ them, or they may go against you.”

The Sikh states of Patiala, Jind, Nabha, Fureedkote and Khytul, all branches of the Phulkean misl had been allied to the British since 1803 to protect their separate and rival interests. The British had been carefully cultivating their alliance to keep them “so divided as to render combination impossible.” Lying on the crossroads between the Mughal Empire and the repeated incursions of the frontier tribes and the Afghans from the north and the Marathas from the south, the inhabitants of these countries had “acquired the ferocity of a wild beast”. Insecurity compelled them to surround their villages with ditches and hedges as protections against the marauding horse, their fields were often overgrown with jungles as they had to go into hiding into their fortified villages, in an area where water was scarce, wells had to be protected with watch towers and every man “was a soldier in defence of his paternal; acres”. News of the mutiny against their British protector threatened them with the possibility of the withdrawal of the protective arm which had brought some peace and stability in their affairs. With memories of the decapitation of the early martyrs in the Shahigunge at Lahore and the annihilation of the Khalsa Dal at the fields of the Gallu Ghara near Sirhind still fresh in their mind, the cis-Sutlej states concentrated all their energies in protecting the rear of the British armies advancing to recover Delhi from the mutineers. They patrolled the Grand Trunk Road from Ferozepur and Phillour down to the very

43. op. cit. Bosworth Smith, *Life of Lord Lawrence* vol. II p98
44. Ibid.
45. op. cit. Care Browne vol. I *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857* p.183
46. op. cit. op. cit. R.N. Cust *Linguistic and Oriental Essays*
47. Ibid.
walls of Delhi. The Jind sowars seized the bridge at Bhagpat and enabled the Meerut force to join headquarters. Thaneswar and Ambala were guarded by the troops of the Maharaja of Patiala and the safety of Loodhiana was entrusted to the Maharaja of Nabha. The assistance of these loyal chiefs was of immense help in meeting the needs of the commissariat like carts, camels, mules, doolies and bearers.48

Beyond the Sutlej in Lahore in the heart of the subjugated Khalsa commonwealth the British played the caste card very deftly to isolate the Punjabees from the disarmed native regiments. Indignant “at being involved in the common disgrace with their Poorbea comrades “the Sikh sepoys of the three disarmed north Indian corps were too glad to be formed into a separate body and have their arms restored.”49 Cheering was it”, remarked Reverend Cave-Browne, “to mark the happy look and buoyant step with which these men, fretting as they had done with downcast air at the implied suspicion, now accepted these proofs of restored confidence and with ready zeal relieved the Europeans of some of their heavy and almost incessant guards.”50 The plan, adopted by Brigadier Corbett at Lahore of singling out the Sikhs and the Punjabees of the disarmed Poorbea corps was carried out in other places as well. In Peshawar too the newly enlisted Sikh soldiers “smarted under the constant complaint and taunt that they were not smart and cleanly soldiers, which had so long kept them out of the ranks of the Bengal Army and made their position, now they had been sparingly enlisted into it, far from pleasant”51. It gave them great satisfaction when they were spared the indignity of having been clubbed with the poorbea for the suspicion and disgrace they had earned through their conduct. Yet many officers like Edward John Lake, the Commissioner and Superintendent of Trans- Sutlej States, still harboured suspicions of the Sikhs. “The Sikhs

48. G. C. Barnes, Commissioner and Superintendent, cis- Sutlej States to Robert Montgomery, Judicial Commissioner for Punjab, 5 February, 1858 in Mutiny Records, Reports vol. 8, Part I
50. op. cit. Care- Browne. P. 228
51. Ibid P 274
look upon us”, he remonstrated, “as usurpers and cannot forgive us for having supplanted them as the dominant class in the country”. 52 He therefore stood in favour of a judicious admixture of Punjabees and Poorbeas in the police as well as the regular army.

Even after their disarmament, the threat from the presence of a large body of disaffected Hindustani soldiers within the province was a factor which could not lightly be dismissed. In order to reach their home in the North-west Provinces – Awadh- Bihar region, the disarmed soldiers would have to cross the manjha or the home of the demobilized khalsa Sikhs. British officers decided to make use of the mutual hatred of the Sikhs and the Poorbeas and tried to stimulate it by the offer of rewards for every Hindustani soldier who should be captured. The greatest tragedy occurred at Ajnala near Amritsar when the 26th native infantry at Mian Mir murdered their commanding officer and tried to escape. Dewan PranNath the tahsildar of Ajnala intercepted the mutineers. Several got drowned in trying to cross the Sutlej in flood, quite a lot were executed and about 45 died of suffocation in a sealed room in the tahsil bastions. 53 The possibility of local conspiracies by fugitive troopers was thus preempted by playing upon the animosities of the Sikhs and the Poorbeas and deserters could be intercepted simply by “rousing the people” 54 against them.

The Sikhs were unable to make up their mind as to what posed a great danger to their existence — the invaders from Hindustan, who had repeatedly robbed them of their peace and well-being – or the British conquerors who could help them restore their status as great military stalwarts. “Hundreds of old Sikh soldiers,” as the Commissioner and the Superintendent of the Lahore division put it, “both the greybeards and middle-aged men, were living in their villages in the manjha, lamenting the want of employment and thinking over former times.” 55 By responding to

52. Major E.J. Lake, Com. of Sup. Trans- Sutlej States to Robert Montgomery, Judicial Commissioner for the Punjab, 5 January 1858. in Mutiny Reports Records vol. 8, Part I
53. F.H. Cooper, Deputy Commissioner, Umritsur to A.A. Roberts, Com. and Supt. Lahore Division 19 February 1858 in Mutiny Reports Records vol. VIII, Collection 2
54. A.A. Roberts, Com. and Sup. Lahore Division to R. Montgomery, Judicial Commissioner for Punjab 20 March 1858 Mutiny Records Reports.
55. Ibid.
the call of the British they could restore their lost status, oust the Hindustani intruders into their province and avenge the wrong inflicted by the city of Delhi on their Guru Teg Bahadur. As General Bernard recovered the Flag Staff Tower in the wake of the engagement at Badhi-ki-serai and secured his position along the Ridge, he asked for more gunners. John Lawrence now called upon the old Sikh artillerymen and sent men like Raja Teja Singh, the old Sikh commander in chief, Sirdar Shamsher Singh Sindhanwalalila and Jowalin Singh, the son of Dhyan Singh, the prime minister and favourite of Raja Ranjit Singh to recover Delhi from the mutineers. 127 Sikh and Punjabi artillerymen were sent by bullock train to Delhi where they worked in batteries throughout the siege.

It was during these days of severe trial and dimmed hopes that John Lawrence decided to throw open the army appointments to the mazhbi or low-caste Sikhs who had so far been engaged in work on the Bari Doab Canal. They were enlisted in large numbers as sappers, miners and pioneers on the suggestion of Herbert Edwardes.

The mazhbis were of the same caste as the rangrhetta or grass cutter who had brought Guru Teg Bahadur’s beheaded body back to his own people from Delhi hidden in a heap of grass. During the frenzied hours of enlistment and march to Delhi the Sikhs must have been inspired by British propagandists of the genre of father Cave-Browne by the vision of a “sweet revenge on the city of the Mogul for the cold-blooded murder of their Gooroo Tegh Bahadur by Aurangzeb.” Max Arthur Macauliffe mentions an anecdote regarding the last days of Guru Teg Bahadur in Mughal custody. When the Guru was reprimanded for looking out of his window on the southern part of his room in a direction which housed the ladies apartments or the zenanas, Teg Bahadur

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56. Cave Browne op. cit. P178
57. Major E.J. Lake Com. and Sup. Trans- Sutlej States to Robert Montgomery, Ind. Com. for the Punjab, 5 Jan, 1858 in Mutiny Reports, Records.
was reported to have replied that he was looking to the south not to find the female apartments but for the arrival of the English from the south to break up the Mughal tyranny and the *purdah* system.\(^{59}\) In the same writing, Macauliffe attributes a speech to Guru Govind Singh exhorting the Sikhs to join the English and be victorious.\(^{60}\) Such stories might have been ingenious afterthoughts, invented to secure the cooperation of the Sikhs in the cause of the British. But they indicate the general trend that the turn of events were going to take. 1857 lifted up the ban against the entry of the Sikhs in the Bengal Army. In 1851, John Lawrence had initiated a trickle of Jat and Khatri entrants to the armies of the English. But this measure had not been fully acted up to for its unpopularity among the high-caste recruits from the North West Provinces – Awadh- Bihar region. 1857 turned the tide and recruitment was thrown open to the Sikhs in large numbers so that they could capture 20% of the entire armed forces of the British in the whole subcontinent in spite of their being a mere 1% of the total population in 1911. The authorship of the popular *ardas* of the Sikhs ‘Raj karega Khalsa’ cannot be accurately ascertained although some attribute it to Guru Govind Singh. The collaboration of the Sikhs with the English that started in 1857 must have aimed at fulfilling this long sought after dream of the Sikhs –

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\begin{align*}
Dilli takht par bahegi aap Guru ki fauj \\
Chatter phirega sis paar barhi karegi mauj \\
Raj karega khalsa aaki rahe na koe \\
Khwar hoe sab milenge bache saran jo hoye
\end{align*}
\]

Should we add a postscript that once the Sikh chiefs along with their artillery men were well on their way to Delhi their mail was checked by British intelligence and disturbing enquiries from their followers at home about the need for spearheading a

\(^{59}\) Max Arthur Macauliffe, ‘How the Sikhs became a Militant Race’ in *Sikh Religion: A Symposium* (Calcutta 1958)  
\(^{60}\) Ibid.
\(^{61}\) The army of your Guru will overrun the throne of Delhi  
- The Mantle will unfold on your head and make you very happy  
- The *khalsa* will rule and no one should be left out  
- Those who will resort to the *khalsa* will overcome all evils
revolt by the men of the land of the five rivers were found to be directed to these leaders. However, it was then too late and the *sirdars* replied that they were already so committed to the cause of the English that there could be no turning back for them.\(^{62}\) The events of 1857 had created a new identity for the Sikhs and this ideal of a parallel nationalism dominated by the politics of the heartland continued to haunt them even after the passing away of colonialism.

\(^{62}\) op. cit. R.B. Smith, Life of Lord Lawrence p. 97