

The Fall of the Kingdom of Punjab: Here lies one who neither spared man nor God

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These are the words written on the epitaph of Khushwant Singh, an Indian author who passed away on March 20, 2014. In fact, Singh has been in multiple professions in his life. In addition to being an author, he was a lawyer, journalist, diplomat, and politician. However, he stands out as an author. He was one of most-read authors of India. He wrote his first well-known novel, *Train to Pakistan*, in 1956. His experience of the 1947 partition of the subcontinent inspired him to write this novel.

Singh wrote five English novels apart from his other work. He is a reputed social realist. He seemed keen to explore the realities of life. Although he spent a major part of his life seeking knowledge and learning about the ways of life away from his homeland, he was a true Indian and Sikh at heart. His realism is a remarkable feature of his English novels, in which Indian culture and history are explained in their true essence in a foreign language. Singh has explored the social and political realities of contemporary Indian life in his literary works. With the publication of his first novel, *Train to Pakistan*, he established himself as a distinguished writer of social realism. Being one of India's most beloved authors, he elevated English writing in India with an unmatched wit and humour and was equally effective and fierce with his pen while dealing with serious political or

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historical issues. His first novel, *Train to Pakistan*, is quite reflective of this writing style.

The Fall of the Kingdom of Punjab is a scholarly work of Singh. The book is a historical account of the events that led to the fall of the great empire of Punjab which was built by Ranjit Singh in the early part of the 19th century. Ranjit Singh had nine sons, but none of them proved capable enough to withstand the cunning British and beguiler blood relatives and fell to the conspiracies, and within 10 years, the mighty empire that Ranjit Singh built was annexed by the British.

Ranjit Singh, the founder of the Sikh kingdom of Punjab, whose name meant *Lion of Punjab*, was the first person in the history of the subcontinent who turned the tide of invasion back into the homelands of the traditional conquerors of India, the Afghans. He was the son of Maha Singh, upon whose death in 1792, he became the chief of Shukerchakias, a group of Sikhs now based in Pakistan.

Upon the death of his father, he inherited the small town of Gujranwala and the surrounding villages. His thirst for power did not let him settle for less. By July 1799, he had seized Lahore, the capital of Punjab, and had laid the basis of the mighty kingdom of Punjab, which till his death remained untouchable and unconquered. At the height of his reign, his empire extended from the Khyber Pass in the northwest to the Sutlej River in the east and from the Kashmir region at the northwest limit of the Indian subcontinent southward to the Thar desert. In 1801, he declared himself *the Maharaja of Punjab*. After capturing Amritsar in 1802, the sacred city of the Sikhs, he consolidated his rule over the whole of Punjab. The state that he created included loads of tonnes of Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims, both in his army and cabinet. Despite his illiteracy, he still managed to keep these different religions together at peace, was known to be a shrewd judge, free from religious bigotry, and treated his adversaries with mildness.

Historians describe Ranjit Singh as a short and unattractive man who had lost the light of his one eye and had a face pitted with blemishes and scars. Maybe that was the reason that he loved to surround himself with handsome men and beautiful women, became a lover of life, and developed a passion for hunting horses, and strong liquor. His alcoholism contributed to his failing liver, and he died in his sleep in 1839, aged 58. Following his death, the fall of the kingdom of Punjab started, and within less than a decade, the kingdom that took several decades to stand on its feet fell in the lap of the British, and the legacy of Ranjit Singh collapsed.

After the death of Ranjit Singh, Sikh history reveals a compelling narrative: the intense rivalry for power set in motion by the political landscape of India in the 19th century. Anyone—a man, a woman, or a child—could claim ascendancy to the royal throne if they were daring, fearless, and ambitious enough. During Ranjit Singh's lifetime, both the British and Sikh sides mutually agreed to a balance of power, cementing an agreement that kept their hunger for power in check. The death of Ranjit Singh disrupted this delicate balance, ushering in a new era of rivalries, conspiracies, cold-blooded murders, and ultimately British dominance. The royalty of Ranjit's family was now subjected to the rule of a foreign and distant queen.

When a third stroke hit Ranjit Singh in 1839 and it became apparent that he would soon die, he appointed his eldest son, Kharak Singh, as his successor. While he was on his deathbed, arguments and disagreements were initiated, starting with the possession of the Kohinoor diamond. Kohinoor diamond, meaning mountain of light, is one of the largest cut diamonds in the world. It is now a part of the British Crown Jewels and is currently set in the crown of the Queen Mother. Many unverifiable theories revolve around the origin of the diamond and its original owner, but none have been verified so far. It passed on from the Kakatiya dynasty to the Khilji dynasty and then remained a part of the

Mughal peacock throne for a while, ultimately landing in the hands of Ranjit Singh and being passed on to his successor Kharak Singh and later rulers from whom the British acquired the diamond, and despite several claims made by the governments of Pakistan, India, Iran, and Afghanistan, it had not been returned.

On a sweltering summer afternoon in the walled city of Lahore, anxiety and grief prevailed among the ministers and courtiers of Ranjit Singh as he lay on his deathbed, awaiting death. Kharak Singh, his elder son from his second wife, was appointed as his successor, and a few hours later, upon the death of his father, he became the new Maharaja of Punjab and was installed on the throne on September 1st, 1839. Kharak Singh had a close relationship with his tutor, Chet Singh Bajwa, which he developed after the death of his mother, and eventually, Bajwa gained such power over him that Kharak Singh was merely a puppet in his hands. This was the beginning of the tensions that led to the conspiracies and backstabbing that brought the kingdom to its end. The influence of Bajwa over the Maharaja created a strained relationship with Prime Minister Raja Dhian Singh. Kharak Singh was believed to lack his father's administrative and diplomatic skills and was known as a simple-minded man or 'imbecile,' as rendered by several historians.

Raja Dhian Singh Dogra was known to resent the influence of Chet Singh Bajwa. It was whispered that both the Maharaja and Chet Singh were secretly planning to sell out Punjab to the British, pay them six annas in every rupee of state revenue, and, worse of all, disband the Sikh army. Misled by these fictitious tales, the court and Nau Nihal Singh, the son of Kharak Singh, became estranged from Kharak Singh.

Chet Singh was assassinated on October 9, 1839. Early that morning, the conspirators entered the Maharaja's residence in the Fort and assassinated Chet Singh in the presence of their royal master, who vainly implored them to spare the life of his friend. They poisoned Kharak Singh with white lead and mercury.

Within six months, he was bedridden, and eleven months after the poisoning, he died on November 5, 1840, in Lahore. The official announcement blamed a sudden, mysterious illness. Though never proven, most contemporaries believed Raja Dhian Singh to be behind the poisoning. Nau Nihal Singh became the third ruler of the Sikh Empire. The remaining history of the Sikh empire is the same as this, with the blood relatives killing each other to finally sell Punjab to the British.

Nau Nihal Singh, who ascended the throne after his father, was seen as a worthy candidate for the throne and was popular among the general public during the days of his father's sickness. On the day of his father's death, Nau Nihal Singh performed his last rites, AND en route palace, a massive stone from the gate of the Hazuri garden fell upon him and his two closest companions, one of whom died instantly. According to Alexander Gardner, the prince had only sustained minor injuries and was able to walk properly after that, but later, when the court physician came to check on him, he found his skull crushed and sheets filled with blood and brain tissues. Dhian Singh insisted the prince had sustained these injuries during the accident, but the court physician said otherwise. He was cremated on November 6, 1840. His mother, Maharani Chand Kaur, became the empress, assuming the title of *Malika Muqaddasa*. Now onwards, the royal court was divided into two factions, one of which had accepted Chand Kaur as their empress and was in the hopes that Nau Nihal Singh's pregnant wife would give birth to a boy, which would be the new Maharaja. The other faction proclaimed his uncle, Sher Singh, as the rightful heir. However, the widow of Nau Nihal Singh gave birth to a son, and Sher Singh besieged Lahore with a 70,000-strong army. Sher Singh was crowned on January 18, 1841, after Chand Kaur agreed to acknowledge his claim to the throne in return for a generous settlement and safe passage. A few months later, on June 11, 1842, Chand Kaur's maids killed her by crushing her skull, just like her son had died. While punishing them, Prime

Minister Dhian Singh heard their insistence that they had killed Chand Kaur on Sher Singh's orders.

With the coronation of Sher Singh, the Sikh empire was breathing its last. None of the sons of Ranjit proved capable enough to withstand the winds that brought the empire to its knees. Sher Singh was killed by Ajit Singh Sandhawalia, who had served as prime minister for Ranjit Singh, Kharak Singh, Nau Nihal Singh, and his mother, Chand Kaur, each of whom died shortly after taking office. Ajit Singh Sandhawalia preferred having Chand Kaur as regent ruler as it allowed him more power. They removed Chand Kaur as the expected heir, and her late son Nau Nihal's daughter-in-law, who was about to deliver, died stillborn. Sher Singh only had time to utter, 'What treachery.' The Sandhawalias also murdered Dhian Singh.

Duleep Singh succeeded Sher Singh. Since the death of Ranjit Singh, he has lived quietly with his mother in Jammu. After the assassination of Sher Singh, he and his mother were recalled to Lahore in 1843, and at the age of five, Duleep Singh was coronated as the Maharaja of the Sikh Empire, with his mother, Jind Kaur, as a regent.

On December 13, 1845, the British declared war on the Sikhs and, after winning the first Anglo-Sikh War, retained the Maharaja as nominal ruler but replaced the Maharani with a Council of Regency and later imprisoned and exiled her. Over thirteen years passed before Duleep Singh was permitted to see his mother again, who was the only person whom he could turn to for advice, and hence, he was at the mercy of the British. Soon after the closure of the Second Anglo-Sikh War, followed by the annexation of Punjab, Duleep Singh was put into the care of Doctor John Login and sent from Lahore to Fatehgarh, with tight restrictions on whom he was allowed to meet. No Indians, except trusted servants, could meet him in private. As a matter of British policy, he was to be culturally anglicized in every possible respect. And just like that, within a span of fewer than 10 years,

the mighty Ranjit Singh's mighty kingdom of Punjab came to an end.

Khushwant Singh reported the misery of Duleep Singh and the ending of an era as follows:

"On 29th March 1849, Mr. Eliot, Lord Dalhousie's secretary, called the durbar in the fort. Duleep Singh took his place on the throne of Punjab. Eliot then read the proclamation declaring the kingdom of Punjab at an end, the Koh-i-Noor diamond was handed over by the young Maharaja and he stepped down from his illustrious father's throne—never to sit on it again. Indeed, Maharaja Ranjit Singh was dead!"

Khushwant Singh has written so feelingly about this topic because he has been personally involved with the subject of similar horrors unleashed by the partition, an eyewitness to the anti-Sikh riots, and much more. His close association with these subjects has enabled him to pour such pain and heart-wrenching details into his writings. His work is enriched by his razor-sharp wit and risqué humour, along with indescribable pain and sadness.