



The British Indian Empire: Military Geography and Emergence Of New Military Landscapes in Punjab

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Abstract

After annexation of Punjab in 1849, the first and foremost task for the British was integration of the Kingdom into the empire, pacification of its population, and acceptance of the new rulers by the citizens. For that purposes military occupied the outskirts of major cities and towns to control the native population, which created the new military landscapes and become the permanent spatial feature known as cantonments. With the passing of time, the compulsions of great game, tribal uprisings in north-west frontier and manpower dependence on the region, physically transformed Punjab into a fortress with large military bases, and networks of the strategic roads and railways connecting them.

Key Words: Military Geography, Military Landscapes, Cantonments, North Western Frontier, Hill Stations

Introduction

The making of British Indian Empire was a complex and multifaceted process, in which hardly any areas of local life that were left unaffected by the massive changes colonialism had engendered. In varying degrees, British influences could be detected and traced in the systems like military, government, religious adherence, patterns of education, the layout of towns and cities, cultural tastes, sports and pastimes in the erstwhile British colonies. The British Empire not only changed the character of people but the landscape in which they lived (Marshall, 201, pp 7-8). In Indian sub-continent too, it could be assumed that military was one of the main institutions through which British extended and penetrated their ethos into the local societies because the military was used not only for conquering but also for revenue collection, policing and law enforcement duties. One of the chief contributions of imperial rule was the creation of a professional army which was need of the hour for the British in the prevailing chaotic condition in the subcontinent. In their spree

of conquests, British were supported by already existing 'military labour market' of Indo-Gangetic region (Kolff, 1990)(Alavi, 1995). They not only utilised the already existing military labour market but also monopolised the market which made the British Empire a garrison state. In addition to that, the regional dynamics played a significant role in determining the shape and contours of the garrison state. While the idea of a garrison state can be said to typify British rule in India, the historical context in which it emerged was firmly rooted in Bengal Presidency, and the British experiences further shaped it in asserting and later consolidating their authority in north-western India, particularly the Punjab. The proximity of Punjab to the Afghan frontier not only compelled British Indian army to centre its recruiting activities in the state but also played an important part in shaping its development under the British like building of strategic infrastructures including roads, railways, canals and establishing cantonment towns (Talbot, 1988, p.11). All these development were spin-off effect of military requirements of the empire.



Military Geography of Punjab

From Military point of view, the Geographical location of the Punjab in the north-west of the Indian sub-continent made it a very active geopolitical and geostrategic region. It connected trade and commerce of India with the Central Asia and West Asia; and often becomes a victim of invasion through these trade routes. This region was marked by lofty mountains on its west, north-west and north contains the Pamir Knot in extreme north-west; from where high mountain ranges shoot off in all directions. Hindu Kush mountains, that lies little westwards from the Pamirs, merge into Sulaiman Range between Punjab and northern Baluchistan. Bolan Pass separates exist on the re-entrant of Sulaiman range and Kirthar ranges lies between Sind and Southern Baluchistan. These Mountains end at Makran coast making the western wall of the region (Gosal, 2004, p.19).

Holdich (1904) argued that the Hindu Kush delimited the natural boundary of Indian Sub-continent and stood as a wall for the military and commercial enterprise from Central Asia through the plains of Bactria and the Oxus to the Kabul valley. He posited that, "every military expedition of consequence which has been directed against India, with Peshawar as the first objective and Lahore and Delhi as the ultimate aim of invasion, has been, so far as history can tell us directed either from Kabul or Ghazni..." (Holdich, 1904, p.75)

Kabul dominated all the routes converging on the extreme north-west of the Punjab; to embark on Indo-Gangetic Plains. The traditional route of pre-Mughal era detoured the Afghan highlands via Herat-Kandahar-Ghazni to Kabul. Hence directed towards the southern extremity of our western borderland (Hamadani, 1992, p.13) (Holdich, 1904, p.89). Punjab always invaded through the four famous mountain passes, which was the gateway to Central Asia and the Indian-subcontinent, such as the Khaiber, Kurram, Tochi, and Gomal passes were part of important trade routes. These four passes

connected the Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan to the Afghanistan cities, mainly Kabul and Kandahar (Schofield, 2010). Khaiber (Khyber) route, or reasonably the Khaiber group of courses, had always been the most famous of all the routes debouched into the Punjab. Khyber route from historical times considered as 'golden gateway' to the wealth of the Indo-Gangetic plains. The highest point in Khaiber Pass was Landi Kotal was almost 24 miles from Jamrud fort. Khaiber Route positioned between the Afridi and Mohmands territories. Khaiber to Kurram was the home of almost all the troublesome tribes. The territory between Kurram and Tochi was an abode of Waziri of Waziristan up to the Gomal River. Adjacent to it was the area of Pathan inhabitant of Suleiman Mountains (Hamadani, 1992, p.16) (Holdich, 1904, p.72&75).

Kurram Pass and Peiwar Pass separated from the tribal territories adjoining the Khaiber Pass by Safed Koh range, known as Kurram Valley. The environs inhabited by the Afridis, Orakzais, Turis, and other Pathan Rohilla tribes. Kurram Valley also opened up to Peiwar Pass. It includes Kohat as a base and Peiwar Kotal as the border, joined the Kurram Valley with the Shatrugan Pass that shuts it from Afghan trade. Kabul and Ghazni were almost equidistant from Peiwar Kotal (Holdich, 1904, p.76)

Tochi Pass formed by the Tochi River, an affluent of Kurram River, inhabited by the Waziris tribe of Pathans and district drive its name from them as Waziristan. Historically, Tochi formed the shortest route to Ghazni. Mahmud of Ghazni used it for ransacking Multan and Sindh, but it never was a great trade route. Still, it was "one of those unraveled knots in frontier geography which require further investigation" to locate its exact place among the north-western passes (Holdich, 1904, pp 79-80).

Gomal Pass composed the 'notional boundary' between Punjab and Baluchistan and formed by the River Gomal in the south of Waziristan. Wazir and Mahsud tribes



inhabited these hamlets and controlled the western slopes of Waziristan and encircled the strategic peaks of Waziristan Mountains of height about 11500 feet above sea-level. Thus, acted as a gateway to southern Waziristan Gomal pass was oldest trade route and throughout the year Ghilzai tribes carried out the Povindah trade, in items from Bokhara and Kabul (Tripodi, 2016, p.75) (Holdcih, 1904, p. 81)

Bolan Pass although not directly opens up into Punjab but strategically linked to Punjab. By crossing Bolan Pass invaders could embark on the Sindh, and then cities of the Punjab like Shikarpur and Khairpur to Dera Ghazi Khan and Multan. On the larger panorama, it connected the Quetta and Kandahar with Sukkur on the river Indus. After Khyber, it was most important link despite the intermediate three passes of Kurram, Tochi, and Gomal Valley. Bolan Pass enclosed by the territories of Khan of Kalat on the west and bounded by the Sibi district in the east (Hamadani, 1992, p. 16).

The geography of Punjab attracted the attention of the British during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. This recognition compelled the British to develop the elementary political links and to some extent trade and commerce relationship. After annexation, the region was vital to pacify the martial instinct people from the frontier region to support outward defence and checkmate the incoming attack of the invading people from the north-west region. So, the network of cantonment laid down to make the people compliant and peaceful to new rules and regulations implemented by the new rulers. After annexation of Punjab in 1849, the first and foremost task was integration of the State into the empire, pacification of its population, and acceptance of the new rulers by the citizens. With the passing of time, the compulsions of great game, tribal uprisings in north-west frontier and manpower dependence on the region, physically transformed Punjab into a fortress with large military bases, and

networks of the strategic roads and railways connecting them (Young, 2005).

New Military Landscapes :

Web Of Cantonments

The laying of new military landscapes in Punjab involved three utilitarian dimensions and purposes such as Internal Security, External Security, and Recreational and Sanatorium purposes. Internal security purpose was served by the cantonments in the plains, External Security was assisted by the cantonments in the frontiers regions, and Hill cantonments used to support the recreational and sanatorium purposes. The cantonments in plains and Hills also served the purpose of reinforcements for the exigencies (King, 1976).

The new military landscapes were mainly represented by the Cantonments. This cantonment in Punjab can be divided into three geographical divisions' i.e. in plains, in hills, and in north western frontier region. The cantonments in plains includes Ambala, Amritsar, Attock, Campbellpore, Ferozepore, Jalandhar, Jhelum, Lahore, Multan, Rawalpindi and Sialkot; in hills includes Bakloh, Dagshai, Dalhousie, Dharamshala, Jutgoh, Kasauli, Murree, Simla, Solan, and Subathu; and in north western frontier region consists Abbottabad, Bannu, Dera Ismail Khan, Kohat, Mardan, Naushahra and Peshawar. Some cantonments were abandoned by British like Karnal, Ludhiana, Nakodar, Kartarpur, Phillaur, and Dera Ghazi Khan with passing of time (Kaur, 2012). For the cantonment in plains the major orientations was on internal security. The garrisoning of troops in them underscored the military imperial imperatives in post annexation times. These cantonments were placed in such a way to meet the military demands of supply, maintenance, and reinforcement on the frontiers too. The cantonments in North Western Frontier region were strategic and held as bulwark for external security of frontiers from the Afghanistan and tribal insurrections by Pathans. The cantonments in the hills were established to serve as



military stations for two purposes; first needs of British officers and soldiers to escape from summer heat waves and to use them as a convalescent depot and second to serve as strategic sites away from natives population. The key military and civil officers decamped in the summer when hot weather made life on the plains unbearable. A large number of soldiers were too stationed in the lower hill cantonments (Grewal, 2009) (Kanwar, 2007). In Punjab these were mainly in the vicinity of Pathankot and Shimla hills.

Conclusion

The new military landscapes, after the annexation of Punjab, necessitated by the requirement of the stationing of the troops for the integration of the Kingdom into the British Indian Empire. For that purposes military occupied the outskirts of major cities and towns to control the native population, which created the new military landscapes and become the permanent spatial feature known as cantonments. These cantonments were connected by the roads and railways to boost communication and mobilization among the coercive arm of the empire scattered across the Punjab. New military landscapes and modern means of communication and mobilization pushed the urbanization as cantonments promoted the economic activity in the rural economy of Punjab. With passing of time; shops, schools, dispensaries, industries, bank, and many other amenities came up in vicinity of these new military landscapes. Thus, these new military landscapes pushed the urbanization of Punjab and turned out agent of modernization that had least chances of development being a frontier province.

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1 Punjab Government had a responsibility of administration of tribal areas, till the North Western Frontier Province was carved out in 1901 by Lord Curzon. These tribal areas were under the charge of Political Agents. This territory was under the charge of the Political Agent of Wana. The profile of these agents were to develop friendly relations with tribal headman and the people, for peaceful passage and in return distribute allowance to them, without hurting the ego of any individual. Gerald Curtis, a political agent in 1943-46, stated that job was like "conscientious comprehensive school headmaster who is trying to encourage the gifted pupil without doing damage to the doctrine of equality (Tripodi, 2016, p.76)