



Impact Factor: 4.081

The Guerrilla Warfare Adopted by Dal Khalsa

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Abstract: Eighteenth century was the most eventful and glorious period in the Sikh History. During this period the Sikh movements remained to continue. Mughals made every effort to set their rule in Punjab and Afghans wanted Punjab in their own possession. But the Sikhs made it impossible for them. Dal Khalsa, the Sikh Force, came forward to protect their homeland from foreigners and established their rule in Punjab. The mode of fighting used by Dal Khalsa had great importance in all their success. According to their condition they selected guerrilla warfare, which proved very helpful for them. Guerrilla warfare is military tactic which was used by the civilians against strong military forces.

Keywords: Dal Khalsa, Mughals, Afghans, Sikhs, Guerrilla warfare.

After the death of Banda Singh Bahadur (Sikh leader after Guru Gobind Singh), the Sikhs were distressed badly by the Mughal Government. Large numbers of Sikhs were killed daily. It became difficult for them to live in their houses and they went in to the jungles. They suffered to survive for long time. Then they took sword against the tyranny of the Government to stay alive. They organized themselves in several fighting units. In that period Ahmed Shah Abdali invaded India several times. During all his invasions the people of Punjab suffered badly. The large troops of invader destroyed the crops, plundered and killed the people and destroyed the whole area. The Mughal Government did not worry about the inhabitants of Punjab. The Sikhs encouraged the common people to protect themselves. They established a strong Sikh army known as *Dal Khalsa*. *Dal Khalsa* was the national army of the Sikhs¹ in eighteenth century. There were eleven groups of Sikh warriors under it. Those groups were under different leaders which were known as *Misals*.² Large number of people joined them. All these *Misals* took the responsibility of the protection of different areas in Punjab.³ They made it difficult for Ahmed Shah Abdali to rule in Punjab and the Sikhs protected their motherland from the invaders.

The Sikhs were common people of Punjab and they were also in small numbers but they defeated the large, strong and well-trained armies of Mughals and Afghans. Though, they had no war material whereas on the other hand, their opponents were less with best weapons and other war ornaments. It is said that it was due to the bravery, the fearlessness and the strong devotion of Sikhs in their faith. Their

¹ Hari Ram Gupta (1939): *History of the Sikhs*, Vol-II, Published by S.N. Sarkar, Calcutta, p. 50.

Khushwant Singh (1999): *History of the Sikhs*, Vol-I, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p. 127.

Lepel Griffin (1870): *Rajas of Punjab*, Punjab Printing Press, Lahore, p.16.

² *Ibid.*, p. 51. Mohamed Latif (1891): *History of Punjab*, Calcutta, p. 291.

³ T.S. Gill (1969): *History of the Sikhs*, National Book Shop, Delhi, p. 24.

suffering made them strong enough to face their opponents. They faced huge loss of lives many times, but they never accepted defeat, they collected their power and again stood before their enemies after few days. In all those fighting guerrilla tactics of warfare played very important role, which was adopted by the Sikh leaders to fight against strong, powerful and trained imperial forces. The Sikhs were common people and they had nothing without their lives, they had no house to live and no food to eat. They were declared outlaws by the Government. They were living in jungles and hills and depended only on natural sources for their basic needs. Then they had no alternative other than holding arms and stood against the Government. They knew it was not possible to defeat them in face to face fighting. Therefore, they needed an irregular war tactic and the leaders find the guerrilla tactic was best for them according to their conditions. Therefore, the Sikhs adopted guerrilla mode of fighting and it became the greatest military development of that period.⁴

The word 'guerrilla' is a Spanish word. It came from the other word '*guerra*' which means war. And guerrilla means a little war. It was a war between the unequal powers. In it one used to be imperial force or strong military force and other was the common people or irregular army or group of untrained people. Guerrilla war was fought by common people against the typical military forces. It was an irregular war tactic which was used by small group of people who were not professional warriors. In this war tactic they fought against the strong and regular armies. It was mostly used against the tyranny of the authorized Government.

The word guerrilla warfare was firstly used by a Chinese General named *Sin Tzu* in his work 'The Art of War' in 6th century B.C.⁵ The guerrilla war tactics are as old as the war itself. These tactics were used by the ancient tribes. These were also used by the wild tribes against the native empires. It was very difficult for the imperial forces to control over the activities of the tribes in hills and jungles.

Guerrilla wars were fought by the armed civilians against the large troops. Those were not any part of typical military force. Guerrilla warriors avoid large units but they established only small group for their fast activities. Surprise attacks, raids, small wars, hit and run are some war tactics which were used by the guerrilla warriors. They moved quickly and kept their war small. They surprised their enemies and retreated immediately.⁶ Mostly they fought in their homeland and got full support of the local inhabitants. They were familiar with their landscape and they got full advantage in their attacks from all these things. Mostly they attacked underway.

The Guerrilla war tactic was used frequently in Maratha period in India but it was also used by Sher Shah Suri and some other warriors in the past. It developed in the period of Shivaji Maratha and became a famous military tactic in 17th and 18th

⁴ Bhagat Singh (2009): *A History of the Sikh Misals*, Punjabi University, Patiala, p. 442.

⁵ Thomas M. Leonard (1989): *Encyclopedia of the Developing world*, Croom Helm, London, P.728.

⁶ Robert Brown Asprey: *Guerrilla Warfare, Military tactics*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.
<https://www.britannica.com>

century.⁷ In the same period when the Sikhs organized themselves in armed units they also adopted the same war tactic against the Mughals. As we know the Sikhs were basically saints with great devotion in their faith. They had no experience of fighting. But the circumstances compelled them to hold arms against the tyranny of the Mughal Government. At that time, the Sikhs were very less in number and they had nothing with them on the name of arms and other war ornaments, but on the other hand the opponent of the Sikhs were too much stronger in their comparison. Then the Sikhs had no alternative and in the pressure of circumstances to adopt the guerrilla war tactics.

A question arose, the Sikh community was known for its bravery, and then why they used guerrilla war tactics against the Mughals in 18th century? There were many reasons for development of guerrilla war tactic by the Sikhs in 18th century. Banda Singh Bahadur challenged the Mughal Government in face to face fighting and the Mughals faced a great loss of life and property in his period. But when he was captured by the Government, he was tortured badly and executed publicly. After his death, the Sikhs faced a life and death struggle. The execution of Banda Singh gave a high jolt to the community and the Sikhs started to think that they had no match with the Mughal Government in open and pitched warfare. Lack of artillery was also a reason, because the Mughals had effective artillery which helped them in the battle field. The swords of the Sikhs would do nothing in front of the Mughal cannons. The policies of the Governors of Punjab towards the Sikhs also paid effect on the decision of mode of fighting of the Sikh army. Zakariya Khan took strict steps to crush the Sikhs completely. He ordered for public persecution of the Sikhs. The Sikhs were killed where they were found. Prizes were announced for each head of the Sikh. Plundering of Sikh houses became lawful act.⁸ At that time head hunting of the Sikhs had made a profitable business.⁹ All it compiled them to drove out from their houses and seeking shelter in the jungle and hills. The life became miserable for them. Then the Sikhs had lack of resources and numerical strength and therefore they found the guerrilla methods of fighting better for them according their condition.

The Sikhs became leaderless after the death of Banda Singh Bahadur. They had to face very serious situations in the absence of leadership. Then they had no central power to guide them all. They were living on their own resources. At that time, it was not possible for them to meet with their opponents in the battlefield. Therefore, they needed an irregular war tactic.¹⁰

⁷ Ranjit Ramchandra Desai: *Sivaji Bhonsle, Sivaji*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.
<https://www.britannica.com>

⁸ Rattan Singh Bhangu (1926): *Prachin Panth Parkash*, Wazir Hind Press, Amritsar, p. 218- 219.

⁹ Khushwant Singh (1999): *A History of the Sikhs*, Vol- I, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p. 121.
Teja Singh and Ganda Singh (1950): *A Short History of the Sikhs (1469-1765)*, Orient Longman, Bombay, p. 121.

¹⁰ Dr. Bhagat Singh (1993): *A History of the Sikh Misals*, Punjabi University, Patiala, p. 442.

The Government took strict steps against the Sikhs after Banda Singh Bahadur, they not only tried to destroy the power of the Sikhs but they tried to destroy the whole community completely. The Sikhs were arrested and executed daily in large numbers. Then the Sikhs leaved their houses and went into the jungles but they had nothing with them for their daily needs. Therefore, the life of Sikhs had become so miserable.¹¹ After some time when Government did not pay much attention towards the Sikhs, they came back to the plains and made up their loss. They reorganized themselves into small units when they got an opportunity. They adopted guerrilla strategy to fight against their opponents. They started plundering the Government treasure passing through jungle to fulfill their economic needs. They also punished or plundered the rich people who helped the Government against them. They also plundered the troops of foreign invaders when they went back with large amount of booty. In those attacks they got large amount of wealth and number of horses. When the forces tried to punish them, Sikhs ran away from their range. Some time they attacked on the foreign troops or their detachment and harassed them by blocking their way in rivers and in jungles. They almost made surprise attacks on their opponents and when their enemy tried to retaliate, they went away from their reach. George Thomas observed the mode of fighting of the Sikhs. He wrote that the Sikhs were engaged with their enemy in small wars continually. They continually attacked and retreated until their horses were not tired. Then they retreated for some distance and left their horses for graze, took some meal and then they again started attacks.¹²

Their horses were very important in the Sikh forces. The Sikhs had the horses of good breeds. They snatched the horses from the Afghan troops, when they passed through their ways. Horses helped in their fast activities in the war. The Sikh forces used to march in the group of forty or fifty. All riders of a group moved forward quickly and reached on the spot from where their enemies came in the range of their guns. Then they stopped their horses and fired on the enemy's forces. After firing, they retreated to reload their guns and repeated the attack. At that time another group of riders came forward and fired on the enemy. In this way they did not allow their enemies for breathing. Sometime the Sikhs retreated from the high battle and a troop of enemy followed them for crushing, in that way the troop get separated from his main army. Then the Sikh riders suddenly turned back and surrounded the enemy from all sides, they gave a strong attack on him. Therefore, Quazi Nur Muhammad an eye- witness said:

*"Even if there is confusion in their army ranks, don't take it as a rout, O young man. Because this is only their war tactic, Beware of this trap of theirs, beware."*¹³

It shows that how the Sikhs used tactics against their enemies. Those Guerrilla tactics proved very helpful for them. They became successful in their marches against their stronger enemies. The Sikhs were living in the jungles and hills for long time

¹¹ Teja Singh and Ganda Singh, op. cit., p. 106

¹² Franklin (1803): *The Military Memoirs of George Thomas*, Calcutta, pp. 71- 72.

¹³ Qazi Nur Mohamed (1765): *Jungnama*, ed. Ganda Singh, Amritsar, 1939, p. 57. Franklin (1798): *The History of the Reign of Shah Allum*, London, pp.71-72.

and they provided safe tracks for their retreats. Though the Sikhs did not get any particular victory in those days, but they successfully drove their enemies out.¹⁴

When Dal Khalsa attacked on forts or cities, they never surrounded it. But they scaled the walls with the help of ladders, ropes and other means and jump inside. Then they opened the gates and their men entered into it. Some time they used the tactic of retreat in those attacks. In it the Sikhs marched upon the fort but soon they retreated. The enemy forces rushed out to punish the retreating army. Then the Sikhs turned and took the possession of the fort.¹⁵

The Sikhs got amazing success in that period against the Mughals and Afghans. In all those fights the guerrilla war tactics used by the Sikhs were responsible for it. The success of Guerrilla tactics was based on some important conditions and luckily the Sikhs found most of them. Therefore, they got positive results from it. Its first condition was unassailable base and the Sikhs found it as hills and jungles, where they spent their lot of time. Secondly, the Guerrilla warriors must have friendly population and the Sikhs were friendly with Hindu as well as with Muslim population of the country. They got strong support from the inhabitants of the country. Thirdly, the Guerrilla fighter must have the quality of high speed and the Sikh fighters had the electrical speed in their movements. Their dressing sense was accordingly as they wore minimum clothes and maximum armour. Fourthly, the guerrilla warriors must be independent in arteries of supply and the Sikhs were independent in it. They had no particular arteries of supply so they did not worry about it. They collected their needs from the area in which they were operating. The population of the different areas of country helped them in all manners. Fifthly, the geographical knowledge of the area they had also proved helpful in the guerrilla warfare and the Sikhs were in their own motherland and they had intimate knowledge about the land which proved helpful in their raids. Sixthly, the opponents of the Sikhs as Mughals and Afghans were foreigners therefore, they could not control the whole country properly. It became a great weakness of them and the Sikhs took advantage from it. All these conditions proved helpful for the Sikhs in their struggled period.¹⁶

The Sikhs not only used guerrilla warfare but they used regular warfare for pitched battles also. In-fact in the starting period of their self-organized army, they were not able to defend trained and strong forces of Mughals and Afghans, therefore the circumstances compelled them to follow the guerrilla war tactics, but after some time, they developed their territories and established their rule in the most part of the country. Then they started regular fighting. They ruled in their areas independently much longer in the comparison of other Indian rulers.

¹⁴ N. K. Sinha(1946): *Rise of the Sikh Power*, Calcutta, p. 116.

¹⁵ Dr. Bhagat Singh (1993): *A History of the Sikh Misals*, Punjabi University, Patiala, p. 445.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 446- 447.