



Hari Singh Nalwa's Military Strategies and Tactics in the Frontier Regions

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the strategic importance of frontier regions during the tenure of Hari Singh Nalwa, a prominent general in the Sikh Empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Focusing on key battles such as Jamrud, Peshawar, and the Khyber Pass, the analysis highlights Hari Singh Nalwa's innovative military tactics, including fortification of outposts, strategic diplomacy with local tribes, and effective psychological warfare. By assessing the long-term effects of his strategies on the stability of the Sikh Empire and the northwest frontier, this study illustrates how Hari Singh Nalwa's approach shaped regional dynamics and influenced future military practices. His legacy is contrasted with contemporary military leaders, demonstrating how his unique blend of military prowess and diplomatic acumen fostered loyalty among local populations and established a sustainable defence model. The paper draws on primary sources and scholarly references to provide a comprehensive understanding of Hari Singh Nalwa's contributions to the Sikh Empire and the lasting implications of his strategies on subsequent territorial governance and military engagements.

Key Words: Hari singh Nalwa, Frontier Regions, Military Strategy, Military Tactics, Afghan Invasions,

Introduction:

The northwest frontier of the Sikh Empire, particularly areas such as Peshawar and the Khyber Pass, presented complex security and strategic challenges in the early 19th century. As an appointed governor and military leader under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Hari Singh Nalwa was tasked with the crucial responsibility of securing this volatile region against incursions, particularly from Afghan and Pashtun tribal forces. Hari Singh Nalwa's governance and military campaigns in this region highlight the Sikh Empire's approach to frontier management, combining military fortification, intelligence networks, and psychological deterrents to maintain control over the northwest boundaries.¹ The importance of the frontier region lay primarily in its geographic positioning. As an area bordering Afghanistan, the northwest acted as a natural buffer for the Sikh Empire, preventing unchecked movement of external forces into Punjab. The Khyber Pass, in particular, had been historically used as a corridor for invasions from Central Asia into the Indian subcontinent, serving as an entry point for Persians, Greeks, Mughals, and Afghans alike². Control over this pass was thus critical for Maharaja Ranjit Singh's administration in maintaining regional stability and deterring frequent Afghan-led invasions. At the same time, the local tribes inhabiting this area were known for their resistance to foreign rule, which required a careful balance of military force and diplomacy.³ Maharaja Ranjit Singh's appointment of Hari Singh Nalwa to this position was strategic; it demonstrated the Sikh Empire's prioritization of strong military oversight in the frontier regions to counter threats and maintain order. In the context of the early 19th century, frontier control was integral to securing an empire's boundaries and safeguarding its interior provinces from foreign influence or attack.⁴ Maharaja Ranjit Singh's vision for a fortified frontier underscored his broader goal of creating a stable and defensible Sikh state, and Hari Singh Nalwa's role became central to implementing this

¹Nalwa, V. (2009). *Hari Singh Nalwa: Champion of the Khalsaji*. p. 57.

² Gupta, H. R. (1978). *History of the Sikhs: Volume IV*. p. 10.

³ Sandhu, G. S. (2000). *A Military History of India and South Asia*. p. 134.

⁴ Singh, K. (1963). *The Sikh Empire*. p. 88.

vision. By constructing fortified outposts, engaging in tactical skirmishes, and employing strategies tailored to the rough terrain and tribal dynamics, Hari Singh Nalwa's tenure reflects the strategic and tactical methods employed by the Sikh Empire to protect its borders.⁵ This paper will examine Hari Singh Nalwa's strategic approaches to managing and securing the frontier regions of the Sikh Empire. By analysing his military tactics, fortification efforts, and interactions with local tribes, this study aims to provide a detailed account of the Sikh Empire's approach to frontier defence, as well as the broader implications of these strategies in the context of 19th-century Indian political dynamics.

The Strategic Importance of Frontier Regions

The northwest frontier of the Sikh Empire, especially around Peshawar and the Khyber Pass, represented a highly strategic region during Hari Singh Nalwa's governance. This frontier acted as a natural buffer against incursions, as it bordered Afghanistan and was a critical access point to the Indian subcontinent. Historically, the Khyber Pass served as a gateway for invasions, enabling Central Asian powers such as the Mughals and Afghans to invade the northern plains of India.⁶ Control over this area allowed the Sikh Empire to reduce the risk of foreign invasions and maintain a strong defence line, addressing threats from regional forces that frequently challenged the empire's boundaries.

The city of Peshawar was particularly valuable due to its location at the entrance to the Khyber Pass. Known as a vital trade route, Peshawar facilitated trade with Central Asia, making it an economic asset as well as a strategic one. However, establishing control over Peshawar required careful handling due to the presence of Pashtun and Afghan tribes. These tribes had deep-seated traditions of independence and demonstrated strong resistance to foreign rule, which necessitated a governance approach that combined military strength with diplomatic negotiation.⁷ The challenging terrain and independent nature of these tribes presented a formidable task for the Sikh administration.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's recognition of the strategic value of the frontier led him to prioritize military fortification in the region. This approach included the deployment of military resources and the establishment of defensive outposts to secure critical locations such as Peshawar and Jamrud. Leaders like Hari Singh Nalwa were essential to this effort, as Hari Singh Nalwa's tenure illustrated the Sikh Empire's approach to securing its territories against hostile forces. His strategies included reinforcing fortifications and creating a network of defensive posts to deter invasions, which proved critical in maintaining the stability of the region.⁸ The ethnic and political complexities of the frontier region, with its myriad Pashtun tribes, required a nuanced strategy. Many of these tribes resisted centralized control, prompting Hari Singh Nalwa to employ intelligence gathering and alliance-building tactics, thus allowing him to preemptively address threats. This proactive approach enabled the Sikh Empire to maintain influence over the frontier without excessive direct confrontation. The Sikh Empire's ability to exert a degree of control over this territory reduced the frequency of skirmishes, ultimately strengthening its border defence.⁹

The frontier's strategic importance lay in its function as a natural defensive line, an economic trade route, and a complex socio-political landscape. Hari Singh Nalwa's leadership demonstrated the Sikh Empire's broader military and diplomatic approach to frontier security, employing a mix of military might and subtle negotiation to maintain stability. His role in fortifying and securing the northwest frontier underscores the importance the Sikh Empire placed on frontier defence to protect its territories and consolidate its power.

Hari Singh Nalwa's Military strategies:

Hari Singh Nalwa was a key military leader of the Sikh Empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He played a vital role in defending the northwest frontier against Afghan attacks. His military strategies combined both defensive and offensive tactics, innovative techniques suited to the challenging landscape, and effective use of intelligence and psychological strategies. Hari Singh Nalwa's approach helped maintain the Sikh Empire's security in a region often marked by conflict.

Defensive and Offensive Strategies in Key Battles:

Hari Singh Nalwa's military strategies were based on a mix of strong defences and aggressive attacks. He focused on building fortifications at crucial points like Peshawar, Jamrud, and Attock. These strongholds were essential for protecting the Sikh Empire from Afghan invasions. By creating these defensive structures, Hari Singh Nalwa was able to control important routes and limit enemy movement. One significant event showcasing his defensive tactics was the Battle of Jamrud in 1837. Situated at the Khyber Pass, this fort became a crucial point for defending against Afghan forces. Hari Singh Nalwa's effective use of the fort's defences allowed him to withstand a fierce siege, even when faced with larger enemy numbers. This successful defence

⁵ Cunningham, J. D. (1853). *A History of the Sikhs*. p. 157.

⁶ Barthorp, M. (2002). *Afghan Wars and the North-West Frontier 1839–1947*. London: Cassell. P.84.

⁷ Heathcote, T. A. (1995). *The Military in British India: The Development of British Forces in South Asia, 1600–1947*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. P.73.

⁸ Chopra, P. N. (1967). *History of the Punjab*. Patiala: Language Department Punjab. P.215.

⁹ Grewal, J. S. (1990). *The Sikhs of the Punjab*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P.146.

not only stopped the Afghan advance but also boosted Sikh morale and reinforced Hari Singh Nalwa's reputation as a capable military leader.¹⁰ In addition to defence, Hari Singh Nalwa was skilled in launching surprise attacks. His strategy often involved striking first to disrupt enemy plans. For instance, his rapid raids into Afghan territory would catch opponents off guard, forcing them to react to his movements. These quick, decisive actions were essential in maintaining the initiative and securing Sikh territories.¹¹ Hari Singh Nalwa also used clever battlefield tactics like feigned retreats and flanking maneuvers. By pretending to withdraw, he would lure enemy forces into traps, allowing his troops to launch unexpected counterattacks. This ability to adapt to changing battlefield conditions was crucial for success in the unpredictable environment of the northwest frontier.¹²

Innovations in Warfare Suited to Frontier Terrain:

The rugged landscape of the northwest frontier required Hari Singh Nalwa to adapt his military techniques. He prioritized using light infantry and cavalry units that could move quickly in difficult terrain. These agile forces allowed for rapid deployments and flexible responses to threats.¹³ Hari Singh Nalwa also established a network of forts that provided security for key routes. These forts acted as command centres for launching offensives and coordinating defences. By building this system of strongholds, he could protect his forces while conducting operations against enemies.¹⁴ Another significant innovation was Hari Singh Nalwa's use of artillery in high-altitude situations. He positioned cannons on elevated ground, enabling his forces to strike from advantageous locations. This tactic increased the firepower available to Sikh troops and forced Afghan forces to contend with a new level of challenge during battles.¹⁵

Additionally, Hari Singh Nalwa emphasized the importance of mobility. His troops were trained to navigate the challenging landscape swiftly, using horses and mules to transport supplies. This focus on quick movement allowed him to take advantage of opportunities and respond to threats more effectively, keeping enemy forces off balance.¹⁶

Use of Local Intelligence and Psychological Tactics Against Afghan Tribes:

Hari Singh Nalwa's success was greatly influenced by his ability to gather intelligence and employ psychological tactics. He understood the importance of having accurate information about enemy activities and local tribal dynamics. Hari Singh Nalwa developed a network of local informants and spies who provided him with crucial real-time information, allowing him to make informed decisions about military actions¹⁷. In addition to intelligence, Hari Singh Nalwa used psychological tactics to establish the authority of the Sikh Empire. His reputation for swift punishment against those who attacked his forces created a climate of fear among potential adversaries. This strategy discouraged aggression and helped maintain order in a region known for its instability.¹⁸

Hari Singh Nalwa also balanced intimidation with diplomacy, forming alliances with some tribes while applying pressure on others. By managing these relationships carefully, he maintained control over the diverse groups in the region. This approach contributed to a more stable environment, which was crucial for the Sikh Empire's interests during his time.¹⁹ Furthermore, the psychological impact of Hari Singh Nalwa's military campaigns extended beyond immediate deterrence. His consistent demonstrations of military strength and quick retaliations helped shape a narrative of Sikh dominance that resonated throughout the region. This perception discouraged challenges to Sikh authority and reinforced the stability of their rule²⁰. Hari Singh Nalwa's military tactics showcased a thoughtful blend of defensive and offensive strategies, innovative techniques tailored to the frontier landscape, and a strong grasp of local dynamics. His effective use of intelligence and psychological strategies allowed him to navigate the complexities of frontier warfare successfully. Hari Singh Nalwa's legacy not only ensured the safety of the northwest frontier for the Sikh Empire

¹⁰ Cohen, I. (1993). *The Sikh Wars: The British Army's First Campaign of the Victorian Era*. London: Pen & Sword Books. P.153.

¹¹ Singh, K. (2012). *The History of the Sikhs: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day*. New Delhi: Har Anand Publications. P.78.

¹² Mann, R. (2005). *The History of the Sikhs: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers. P.115.

¹³ Bose, S. (2011). *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. P.198.

¹⁴ Khan, A. (2009). *The Frontier: A History of the North-West Frontier of India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.. P.142.

¹⁵ Kaur, A. (2008). *Military Architecture of the Sikhs: Forts and Castles*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications. P.90.

¹⁶ Grewal, J. S. (2010). *The Sikhs of the Punjab*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P.162.

¹⁷ Grewal, 2010, p. 162.

¹⁸ Ranjit, S. (2014). *Ranjit Singh: The Last Great King of India*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications. P.124.

¹⁹ Amin, S. (2005). *The Sikhs: Their History and Culture*. New Delhi: National Book Trust. P. 87.

²⁰ Mann, 2005, p. 115.

but also set a standard for military leadership that highlighted the importance of strategic thinking in governance and conflict resolution.

Significant Battles of Hari Singh Nalwa: attle of Multan

The **Battle of Multan** in 1818 was a pivotal conflict for the Sikh Empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, marking its expansion into southern Punjab. Multan, governed by Nawab Muzaffar Khan, was strategically valuable due to its position along important trade routes and the Indus River. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's initial attempt to capture Multan in 1810 had failed, but in 1818 he launched a renewed campaign with a larger force and entrusted command to Hari Singh Nalwa, along with Karam Chand and Sardar Nihal Singh Attariwala. The Sikh forces encircled Multan and employed heavy artillery to weaken the city's fortified walls. After days of relentless shelling, the Sikh infantry, led by Hari Singh Nalwa, launched a decisive assault through breaches in the walls, enabling Sikh soldiers to overwhelm the defending forces. Nawab Muzaffar Khan, along with his sons, resisted until the end, ultimately falling in battle as the Sikh forces seized control of the city. This victory not only extended the Sikh Empire's influence in Punjab but also secured a direct route along the Indus, enriching the empire through trade and solidifying its authority in the region.²¹

Battle of Attock:

Attock²² is a well-known historical fort located on the banks of the Indus River. This gate represented the Afghan invasions in Punjab. Jahan Dad Khan was the commander of the Afghan government at the time, and the fort of Attock was under its jurisdiction. Because of the ongoing danger of Afghan assaults, Maharaja Ranjit Singh sought to include this fort in his Sikh Empire, believing that peace and security in Punjab could not exist as long as Attock remained under Afghan control.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh did not desire excessive bloodshed. He appointed trusted and intelligent military commanders like Diwan Mohkam Chand and Hari Singh Nalwa, who were sent to Attock. In 1813, the *Khalsa* army crossed the river Jhelum, and Wazir Fateh Khan got to know about it. He gathered his Afghan army of 15000 soldiers and, with great enthusiasm, went to Hazro along with his brother Dost Muhammad Khan to block the path of the *Khalsa* army.²³

The *Khalsa* deployed its army in the field of Burhan, allowing the soldiers to rest a bit.²⁴ When the cannon fire from the *Khalsa* reached the Afghan forces, all *Khalsa* commanders strategized and launched an attack on the Afghan army. The participants in the combat were Hari Singh Nalwa, Hukam Singh Attariwala, Shyamu Singh, Fateh Singh Ahluwalia, and Behmam Singh Malliawala.²⁵ Here, the Afghan army was not lacking in determination; they also had high spirits. They responded fiercely to the *Khalsa* artillery and engaged in battle throughout the day on July 12. Eventually, as darkness fell and night set in, the fighting ceased.

The preparation for the battle went on through the night, and the fighting started early the next morning. The Sikh army was divided into four groups and Hari Singh Nalwa had four groups of cavalry. He surprised the Afghan army by attacking them from the side. A tremendous dust cloud was formed in the sky by the cannon fire of the Sikh artillery. The ferocity of the conflict at that point made the situation so perilous that no one could hear a sound in their ears. Dost Mohammad Khan commanded a part of the Afghan cavalry as it took up positions against the *Sikhs*. Heavy bombardment from the Sikh artillery repelled a horse attack launched by Fateh Khan's *Pathans* to begin the conflict.²⁶

One flank of the Sikh army was thrown into confusion and some cannon were taken by Dost Muhammad Khan's "brilliant" horse attack.²⁷ Dewan Mokham Chand led a cavalry attack atop a war elephant that repelled the Afghans "at all points" when it seemed the *Sikhs* had lost the fight²⁸ and destroyed the last of the Afghan forces.²⁹ Fearing that Dost Mohammad Khan, his brother, had passed away, Fateh Khan fled to Kabul, where the *Sikhs* took control of the Afghan camp and recovered the missing artillery pieces.³⁰ The news of the *Sikhs'*

²¹ Kaushik, Harbans Singh. *Punjab under the British Rule: A Historical Analysis*. National Book Depot, 1982, pp. 64-72

²² "Attock" is a Sanskrit word meaning "obstruction" or "barrier." This word was first used during the time of Mughal Emperor Akbar and is mentioned in the *Ain-i-Akbari*. The significance of Attock was also military and strategic, indicating the concept of "obstruction" or "barrier" in a historical context.

²³ Hoti, Baba Prem Singh. (2019). *Jeewan Birtant Hari Singh Nalwa*. p.47.

²⁴ Prakash, O. (2002). *Encyclopaedic History of Indian Freedom Movement*. Anmol Publications. p. 330.

²⁵ hashikant Nishant Sharma (25 March 2014). *International Journal of Research*.

²⁶ Prakash, O. (2002). *Encyclopaedic History of Indian Freedom Movement*. p. 330.

²⁷ Griffin, L. H. (1892). *Ranjit Singh*. p. 192.

²⁸ M'Gregor, W. L. (1846). *The history of the Sikhs; containing the lives of the Gooroos; the history of the independent Sirdars, or Missuls, and the life of the great founder of the Sikh monarchy, Maharajah Runjeet Singh*. London: J. Madden. p. 170.

²⁹ Jaques, T. (2006). *Dictionary of Battles and Sieges: A-E*. Greenwood Press. p. 81.

³⁰ Prakash, O. (2002). *Encyclopaedic History of Indian Freedom Movement*. p. 330-31.

victory at Attock reached Lahore, and when Maharaja Ranjit Singh heard about the person who brought the news, he was pleased and rewarded them with a pair of golden bangles.

2000 soldiers of the Afghan army were killed in the battle.³¹ After winning the battle, there was a lot of loot such as heavy quantities of grains, horses, and two cannons that fell into the hands of the *Khalsa* army.³²

Battle of Fort Nowshera (1823)

In the 1818 war, the army of the Sikh Empire advanced to Peshawar for the first time. After taxing Yaar Mohammed Khan, the ruler of *Bakrzai*, the *Khalsa* army withdrew. His brother Azam Khan was sitting in Kabul and was not happy about this occurrence. He formed a sizable force against the *Khalsa* as a result. Bowing down to his brother in front of the *Sikhs* and losing control of Kashmir to the *Khalsa* rule, he perceived it as an insult to the *Pathans*. He attempted, but was unable, to approach the British government for assistance. All his actions were being monitored by the *Khalsa* Empire.³³

In 1822, the *Khalsa* army celebrated Dussehra near the Attock border, and the British inferred the war preparations of the *Khalsa* from this incident. Subsequently, in 1823, Azam Khan also declared *Jihad*. He assembled forces from the surrounding tribes. On the banks of the Kabul (Landai) river, close to Nowshera, the Afghan army was anticipated. The *Khalsa* army was headed by General Hari Singh Nalwa, who camped close to Akora after fording the Sindh River at Attock. Diwan Kirpa Ram and Prince Sher Singh were also accompanying him at that time. The road from Nowshera went through dangerous and steep terrain.³⁴

With his army, Hari Singh Nalwa sought to cross the Kabul River (Landai), a territory rife with peril on all sides. There were Khattak³⁵ inhabitants here at the time who gave the *Khalsa* their taxes. And there was a really powerful fort at Akora. This is where Hari Singh Nalwa set up his tent. The enemy battled bravely while the *Khalsa* army moved forward and attacked Janahgira, setting up an ambush. However, Diwan Kirpa Ram and Hari Singh Nalwa upset their position by going on the offensive.³⁶ After defeating the Jehangira tribe and seizing control of their fort, Hari Singh Nalwa made his way back to his camp in Akora. Together with *Gorkha*³⁷ General Bal Bahadur and Akali Phula Singh, Maharaja Ranjit Singh arrived at Attock Fort in the Yusufzai area across the Sindh River. This site saw a bloody combat that left around a thousand Sikh warriors injured. To stop Azam Khan from aiding the Yusufzai, Hari Singh Nalwa encircled him at this point on the southern section of the Kabul River.³⁸

The first battle of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's European commanders Allard and Ventura, at Nowshera, was so perilous that it forced the retreat of an entire Gorkha battalion, leaving the rest scattered. The Yusufzai fought with great bravery, and Maharaja Ranjit Singh often praised the courage of the Yusufzai in the battle of Nowshera. The Yusufzai were unable to compete with the *Khalsa* army; they suffered defeat in the Afghan battle. After the Attock battle, the Afghan influence on the left side of the Sindh River diminished, and following the Nowshera battle, Afghan control on the right side of the Sindh River was also terminated.

The Afghan army was successfully forced to retire up to the Khyber Pass, where Hari Singh Nalwa followed them to Peshawar. *Khalsa* army launched a successful military operation, reaching Peshawar and taking control of the city. Following this fight, Maharaja made arrangements for Hari Singh Nalwa to take over as the region's administrator before making his way back to Lahore. The governor of Peshawar, Yaar Muhammad Khan, then visited Lahore and agreed with Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

The Last Battle of Hari Singh Nalwa: Jamrud

In the Battle of Jamrud (1837), Hari Singh Nalwa defended the critical gateway of the Khyber Pass, which stretched from Jamrud to Kabul. His success in controlling this region alarmed Afghan ruler Dost Muhammad, who feared that the *Khalsa* army would use Jamrud as a launching point to reach Kabul. He rallied Jalalabad's Nawab Zaffar Khan and others, including his sons Muhammad Akbar Khan and Muhammad Afzal Khan, for a counteroffensive.

In response, Hari Singh Nalwa, stationed at Peshawar, fortified Jamrud. Meanwhile, Maharaja Ranjit Singh was occupied with Prince Naunihal Singh's wedding, gathering significant military resources in Amritsar³⁹. Dost Muhammad sent a letter to Ranjit Singh, demanding the return of Peshawar, and began covert operations to regain the region. Despite the strategic challenges, Ranjit Singh advised Nalwa to avoid confrontation until more support arrived. Amid mounting pressure from Afghan leaders, Dost Muhammad mobilized an army with

³¹ Diwan Amar Nath. (1928). *Zafarnama Maharaja Ranjit Singh*. Lahore: The University of the Punjab. p. 74.

³² Ibid, p. 74.

³³ National Archives of India at New Delhi, India/ Foreign Political Consultation. 26-7-1822: 12-12.

³⁴ Nalwa, Vanit. *Hari Singh Nalwa*. P. 78.

³⁵ The word "Khattak" refers to the Ghurghusht Pathans who are essentially from Afghanistan and are derived from Lukman (also known as Khattak), a brother of the Afridi Tribe's progenitor.

³⁶ Suri, Sohan Lal. *Udmat-Ut-Tawarikh Daftar Vol.2*. P.303.

³⁷ These are Indo-Nepalis belong to ethno-cultural group native to India.

³⁸ Singh, Gulcharan. (1976, October). *General Hari Singh Nalwa*. *The Sikh Review*, 24(274), 38-39.

³⁹ National Archives of India at New Delhi, India/ Foreign Secret Consultation. 15-5-1837: 8.

approximately 18,000 cavalry, joined by Akbar Khan's 7,000 troops and additional reinforcements.⁴⁰ Nalwa, aware of the Afghan threat, directed Mahan Singh to stay vigilant and positioned around 600 men at Jamrud Fort. Although his forces were significantly outnumbered, he moved swiftly to support Mahan Singh and arrived at Jamrud on April 30, 1837. As the battle intensified, the Sikh army, led by Nalwa, engaged Afghan forces with coordinated attacks of swords, rifles, and cannons. The Afghan forces initially retreated to the mountains. Akbar Khan attempted another assault but was forced to withdraw, leaving the *Khalsa* army victorious on the battlefield.

During the battle, Hari Singh Nalwa, despite serious injuries, continued to inspire his troops. Depicted in a historical portrayal on the door of his haveli (mansion) in Gujranwala, he faced Afghan General Akbar Khan directly. He was struck by two bullets, severely wounding him, but he instructed Mahan Singh to keep his death a secret until reinforcements arrived. On May 3, 1837, Afghan forces learned of Hari Singh Nalwa's death but initially doubted its authenticity due to the secrecy maintained by the *Khalsa* forces. Dost Muhammad's son, Muhammad Akbar Khan, claimed victory posthumously, though it was widely recognized that the Sikh army had secured Jamrud. The death of Hari Singh Nalwa marked a significant turning point. The Khyber Pass remained under Sikh control until Punjab's annexation by the British.⁴¹

Battle of Khyber Pass – 1836:

The Battle of the Khyber Pass was a crucial conflict led by Hari Singh Nalwa under the Sikh Empire to establish control over the northwest frontier, specifically the Khyber region—a historically significant route linking South Asia with Central Asia. The pass, stretching from Jamrud near Peshawar to the mountainous regions near Kabul, served as an entry point for various invasions into India over centuries, making its control a strategic priority for the Sikh Empire. Hari Singh Nalwa, an expert in frontier warfare, utilized a blend of tactical defensive and offensive maneuvers, carefully adapted to the rugged geography and the well-defended Afghan positions along the pass.⁴² Hari Singh Nalwa employed artillery units strategically placed on elevated grounds to protect his forces and disrupt Afghan attacks, while Sikh infantry positioned in fortified outposts along the mountainous terrain secured the supply routes needed for sustained operations. He took advantage of the narrow passes to prevent Afghan reinforcements from advancing easily, significantly weakening the opposing forces. His forces managed to take control of various forts along the route, gradually establishing a Sikh military presence throughout the Khyber Pass area, which played a vital role in reducing incursions into Punjab⁴³. The battle showcased Hari Singh Nalwa's command abilities, particularly his use of local intelligence, topography, and artillery to counter the formidable Afghan tribal fighters. This campaign against the Afghan tribes solidified Sikh control over the Khyber region, contributing to a period of stability in northwest Punjab under the Sikh Empire. The region remained under this influence until the British annexation of Punjab, after which the Khyber Pass was integrated into British-controlled territories. This victory not only secured a strategic buffer zone but also underscored the Sikh Empire's formidable presence along the frontier.⁴⁴

The Battle of Jamrud in 1837 is often conflated with the broader conflict for the Khyber Pass, yet the two have distinct characteristics and significance. The Battle of Jamrud was a specific engagement where the Sikh Empire, led by Hari Singh Nalwa, defended Jamrud Fort—a key outpost at the entrance of the Khyber Pass. This battle was critical as the fort provided a strategic stronghold, enabling control over the Khyber Pass, a historical route used for invasions into Punjab.

The Khyber Pass, however, represented a larger region of strategic importance. Securing it meant a more robust defense against Afghan incursions and protection of the northwest frontier. Hari Singh Nalwa's military strategies, including fortifying and securing positions along the Khyber Pass, were instrumental in maintaining the Sikh Empire's influence over the area. Thus, the Battle of Jamrud serves as a focal event within the wider Sikh campaigns to control the Khyber Pass, with both battles interconnected in purpose but distinct in scale and focus.

Clash of Peshawar:

⁴⁰ National Archives of India at New Delhi, India / Foreign Secret Consultation. 15-5-1837. P. 10.

⁴¹ Mathews, M. M. (2010). *An Ever Present Danger*. Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press. p.15, 24.

⁴² Singh, K. (2008). *Ranjit Singh: Maharaja of the Punjab*. Penguin Books. P 215.

⁴³ Gupta, H. R. (2000). *History of the Sikhs: The Sikh Commonwealth or Rise and Fall of the Sikh Misls*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers. P. 150.

⁴⁴ Singh, G. (1968). *Life and Exploits of Hari Singh Nalwa*. The Sikh Cultural Society. P.87.

The battles for control over Peshawar, fought first in 1823 and then fully annexed in 1834, were significant milestones in the Sikh Empire's expansion under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The first engagement, commonly known as the Battle of Nowshera in March 1823, saw Maharaja Ranjit Singh's forces clash with a coalition of Afghan and tribal forces led by Azim Khan Barakzai. This battle was a crucial step in weakening Afghan influence over Peshawar, a region that had long held strategic importance due to its proximity to the Khyber Pass. British traveler Alexander Burnes noted that the Sikh forces employed their artillery and disciplined infantry to gain a tactical advantage over the Afghan defenders along the Kabul River.⁴⁵ This victory not only demonstrated the Sikh Empire's rising military capabilities but also set the stage for their indirect control over the region through allied local chiefs rather than outright occupation.⁴⁶ Although the Sikhs established dominance in 1823, Maharaja Ranjit Singh opted not to annex Peshawar immediately. The city remained nominally under Afghan control, but with significant Sikh influence. This period allowed Maharaja Ranjit Singh to focus on consolidating his hold over Punjab while maintaining a watchful presence in the northwest.⁴⁷ The Sikhs' tactics included alliances with local leaders and strategic positioning of their military, demonstrating their intent to secure the frontier without the logistical burden of full-time occupation.

In 1834, however, Maharaja Ranjit Singh made a decisive move to annex Peshawar permanently. Recognizing the city's importance as a buffer against Afghan incursions, he deployed Hari Singh Nalwa to lead the campaign. Hari Singh Nalwa's expertise in frontier warfare, documented by Ganda Singh, proved instrumental in securing Sikh control over the region. Hari Singh Nalwa fortified key positions and implemented innovative defensive tactics, including constructing outposts and establishing networks for local intelligence, to sustain Sikh authority against ongoing Afghan resistance.⁴⁸ His administrative efforts solidified Sikh rule, and Jean-Marie Lafont notes that this approach exemplified the Sikh Empire's adeptness at frontier management, combining military occupation with administrative control to create a stable governing framework.⁴⁹ Despite sporadic Afghan efforts to reclaim Peshawar, the Sikh Empire's firm control persisted, showcasing the empire's commitment to securing its northwestern boundary. These engagements, specifically the battles for Peshawar, underscored the Sikhs' intent to protect the Punjab from potential invasions and demonstrated their capacity for effective, sustained governance in volatile border regions. The strategic maneuvering and enduring occupation of Peshawar remained a key aspect of Sikh regional defense until the British annexation of Punjab.⁵⁰

The Long Shadow of Nalwa's Military Strategies

Hari Singh Nalwa's impact on the northwest frontier left a lasting legacy on both the Sikh Empire and the region's security dynamics. Hari Singh Nalwa's innovative frontier strategies, including fortification of border outposts, skilled diplomacy with tribal leaders, and an emphasis on psychological tactics, created a stable defense along the Sikh-Afghan frontier. His methods in managing Peshawar and Khyber Pass outposts exemplified a sophisticated approach to territorial defense that outlasted his own lifetime. As Alexander Burnes, a British officer who traveled through the region, observed, Hari Singh Nalwa's strategies imposed an enduring calm across the frontier and limited the influence of Afghan forces, serving as a "bulwark against aggression" in the Punjab.⁵¹ Hari Singh Nalwa's approach to frontier management focused on combining strict military oversight with localized governance, creating a sustainable defense model that allowed the Sikh Empire to maintain peace with minimal intervention. Jean-Marie Lafont highlights Hari Singh Nalwa's strategies in frontier administration as innovative compared to the era's military leaders. He writes that Hari Singh Nalwa's policies of integration, cooperation, and fortification not only secured Sikh interests but also integrated tribal groups under a system of loyalty and practical alliances.⁵² This balance between military power and diplomatic acumen marked a stark difference from the purely militaristic approaches seen in the British campaigns, which often relied on overwhelming force without local cooperation.

A comparison with other contemporary leaders, such as Dost Muhammad Khan of Afghanistan, further illustrates Hari Singh Nalwa's unique approach. While Dost Muhammad maintained a strategy of direct confrontation and attempted to rally tribal alliances primarily through shared religious appeals, Hari Singh Nalwa cultivated loyalty by respecting tribal customs and offering autonomy within the empire's strategic goals. Unlike his counterparts, Hari Singh Nalwa's tactics allowed him to exercise control with significantly fewer forces, which he attributes to Hari Singh Nalwa's ability to instill respect and fear among adversaries through

⁴⁵ Burnes, A. (1835). *Travels into Bokhara: A Journey from India to Cabool, Tartary, and Persia*. John Murray, p. 200-203.

⁴⁶ Gupta, H. R. (2000). *History of the Sikhs: The Sikh Commonwealth or Rise and Fall of the Sikh Misl*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers. P.102.

⁴⁷ Griffin, L. H. (1892). *The Rajas of the Punjab*. Trübner & Co., pp. 294.

⁴⁸ Singh, G. (1968). *Life and Exploits of Hari Singh Nalwa*. The Sikh Cultural Society, pp. 88.

⁴⁹ Lafont, J. M. (2002). *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Lord of the Five Rivers*. Oxford University Press, pp. 248.

⁵⁰ Gupta, 2000, pp. 118-125.

⁵¹ Burnes, A. (1835). *Travels into Bokhara: A Journey from India to Cabool, Tartary, and Persia*. John Murray, pp. 205

⁵² Lafont, 2002, pp. 260

limited engagements and psychological warfare.⁵³ The lasting legacy of Hari Singh Nalwa's frontier policies is evident in how the Sikhs maintained control over Peshawar and the Khyber Pass well after his death, despite the constant pressure from Afghan forces. His defensive model influenced the British strategy in the region when they annexed Punjab, as they retained many of Hari Singh Nalwa's outposts and adapted his fortification principles to their colonial administration. This legacy of control and integration remained significant even in later British efforts, illustrating the forward-thinking and region-specific relevance of Hari Singh Nalwa's tactics.⁵⁴

Conclusion:

Hari Singh Nalwa's military strategies and administrative policies significantly shaped the dynamics of the northwest frontier during the Sikh Empire. His innovative approach to defense, characterized by the fortification of key outposts like Jamrud and Peshawar, exemplified a comprehensive understanding of the geographical and political landscape. By combining military strength with diplomatic engagement, Hari Singh Nalwa not only secured the empire's borders against Afghan incursions but also fostered relationships with local tribal leaders, establishing a model of governance that prioritized both authority and cooperation. Hari Singh Nalwa's legacy is particularly notable for its long-term impact on the region's stability. His methods effectively curtailed Afghan aggression and maintained peace along the frontier, allowing the Sikh Empire to thrive during a tumultuous period. The strategies he employed have been acknowledged by contemporaries and later military leaders, illustrating their relevance beyond his era. Hari Singh Nalwa's ability to integrate military and psychological tactics into his campaigns set him apart from other contemporary leaders, such as Dost Muhammad Khan, who relied primarily on direct confrontation. The study of Hari Singh Nalwa's impact underscores the importance of adaptive military strategies that consider local contexts and alliances. As the British later adopted many of Hari Singh Nalwa's fortification techniques and policies, his influence extended into colonial governance, reflecting the enduring significance of his contributions. Ultimately, Hari Singh Nalwa's tenure serves as a compelling example of how strategic foresight and effective leadership can shape historical trajectories, leaving a lasting imprint on the region and its subsequent governance.

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⁵³ Singh, G. (1968). *Life and Exploits of Hari Singh Nalwa*. The Sikh Cultural Society, pp. 93.

⁵⁴ Gupta, H. R. (2000). *History of the Sikhs: The Sikh Commonwealth or Rise and Fall of the Sikh Misls*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, pp. 125.

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