

Nand Singh and Jangnamah Europe: Subaltern insights on the wars of Empire

ISE blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2017/04/05/nand-singh-and-jangnamah-europe-subaltern-insights-on-the-wars-of-empire/

2017-4-5

*Jangnamah poetry is a literary form dating back to the 16th century, used by Punjabi authors to narrate conflict. Here **Raman Singh Chhina** discusses the significance of Jangnamahs as a historical resource, highlighting one particular work which offers a unique insight on a Sikh soldier's experience of WWI.*



Nand Singh, an Indian poet and soldier who witnessed the World War I fighting under the British in Aden, opens his *Jangnamah Europe* verse with assassination of the 'Shehzada' (Prince) of Austro-Hungarian Empire by the Serbians. His poem then talks about the events which led to the German invasion of Belgium and how "the compassionate British Government, stood with Belgium and France against the arrogant Germany who broke all the agreements."

Nand Singh's work and other *Jangnamahs* of the British period in Punjab are valuable literary and historical narratives providing rare subaltern perspectives about the colonial wars and conflicts. Even prior to the WWI, Punjabi soldiers had fought under British in the [Second Anglo-Afghan war](#), [Anglo-Egyptian war](#), [Second Opium war](#), [Boxer Rebellion](#) in China and [multiple campaigns](#) in the North West Frontier. There was very little documentation of this period "from below", and of this limited historiography *Jangnamah* poetry holds a vital but largely forgotten position. Nand Singh finished *Jangnamah Europe* on 7 June 1919 and is arguably the first work in Punjabi discussing the European and Middle Eastern people, empires and politics.

Jangnamah, a genre of historical poetic writing which documented the events of a war, entered Punjab in the late 16th century as a literary response to the Persian epics. It found patronage in the hands of Punjabi Muslim poets like Maulvi Rukundin, Hamid and Shahjahan Muqbal who honed this craft commemorating the 7th century Islamic wars of Karbala, Badr and Uhud.



Image: Iron Sikh soldiers. Credit: [Singh](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Afghan invasions, the crumbling Mughal Empire and rise of the Sikh power in late 18th century created another

period of great turmoil and conquest in Punjab. This brought war as a tangible phenomenon to the Punjabi poet and led to a renaissance in the Jangnamah literature. It shifted from religious metaphorical style to a historically accurate poetic description of war as witnessed by the contemporary poets.

The Magnum Opus of this genre is about the final war of the Sikh empire of Punjab. Jangnamah *Hind Punjab*, or *Singhan Firanghian* (Sikhs and British) as it is variously titled, was composed by Shah Muhammad, a Punjabi Muslim from Gurdaspur in the central Punjab. It chronicles the events which built up to the First Anglo-Sikh war in 1845, from the death of [Maharaja Ranjit Singh](#), the treachery and politics that followed in his court and finally the battle which the Sikhs lost.

In the British Raj, specifically during the mutiny of 1857, defeated Sikh chiefs heralded the British call to “retrieve their characters” by taking service in the British Indian Army. Most of those who signed up subsequently served in the North West Frontier, which remained the constant theatre of war under the British. The bleak, blood thirsty passes inspired a great deal of poetry ranging from the [romanticised ballads of Rudyard Kipling](#) to the [folk Pashto legends of Malalai of Maiwand](#), who died rallying the Afghan Ghazis to fight the “British infidels” in the battle of Maiwand during second Anglo-Afghan war. At least half a dozen Jangnamahs were composed in this period; the most notable are the ones about the siege of Delhi during Mutiny and the expeditions of [Chitral](#), [Tirah](#) and [Malakand](#) in the North Western Frontier during the last decade of 19th century.

Havildar Nand Singh, who composed the *Janganamah Europe* giving an empirical account of the First World War was a Sergeant in the Malay State Guides. His regiment was raised in 1896 with its headquarters in Taiping, Malaysia. It had its [origins](#) in the Perak Sikh police force and composed mainly of Punjabi Sikh and Muslim soldiers. The Guides had offered overseas service multiple times but it was not until World War I that the regiment was baptised by blood in Yemen. On September 26 1915 they left Taiping to join the Aden Field Force. Nand Singh talks about the recruitment that how everyone from the weaver, the bard to the teacher, the clerk and even Pundits and Maulvis were drafted into the service and trained in digging bunkers, shooting rifles and saluting the officers.

One distinctive aspect of the work is that the poet repeatedly returns to talk about the misery and longing of the women left behind in their homes. For them both local officials and Germans turn villainous, they lament the local police constable who threatened their sons with false accusations to force them to enlist and loathe the Zaildar and village heads who ‘took’ their sons, brothers and husbands away from them. With the progress of war they start receiving messages of soldier’s deaths from Regimental stations and they moan and wail at Germany for its cruelty, for killing their sons in the unheard lands of France and Basra.

In contrast to most other Jangnamahs of this period his tone is not of flattery, for example he uses word Sahib once only for Lord Kitchener. However, he recurrently stresses ‘Namak Halali’ (loyalty) whether it be of the 14th Sikh Regiment who fought almost to their last man at Gallipoli or as a virtue for new recruits to uphold. His work thus provides a measured outlook of the war and an insight into what Regimental honour and loyalty meant to the native soldiers.

Adulation is more frequent in British-sponsored works like Qasim Ali’s Zafarnamah-i-Kabul which is [considered a rendering of the first Afghan war](#) which favours the British to counter the popular Jangnamahs of this war composed by Hamid Kashmiri and Mohammad Gholam Gholami. Similarly the *Jangnama of Chitral*, in which Subadar Wadhawa Singh of 23rd Sikh Pioneers Regiment sketches the dramatic murder of the ruler of Chitral by his brother Amir-ul-Mulk, the siege of the fort and then finally the relief under Major General Sir Robert Low, also suffers from a British eulogising style. It was presented by the poet to his Colonel S.V Gordon in 1896 and seems to have then been used as an instrument to firm the fidelity of the native troops.

Nand Singh discusses multiple theatres of action ranging from Gallipoli, Kut-al-Amara and Baghdad to the battle of Verdun on Western Front. He vividly describes his own regiment’s [multiple confrontations in and near Aden](#) and their bravery which won a Military Cross, an Indian Order of Merit, eight Indian Distinguished Service Medals and

praise and appreciation from Major General J M Stewart, General Officer commanding the Aden Field Force.

Even the war's end did not bring relief for Nand Singh and his fellow soldiers. When the guns and artillery were silenced they continued to lose their lives as they were struck down by the [influenza epidemic](#) which eventually claimed the lives of an [estimated 14 million](#) Indians (not just soldiers). Nand Singh writes:

“With the telegraphs of armistice, nemesis changed its face/ The deadly fever spread, it takes a man's life faster than the bullet's pace”

In 1914 the Guide had initially refused to mobilise. The reasons have been [variously linked](#) to the seditious Ghadarite influence, the Komagata Maru incident, and sympathy of Muslim soldiers with Khalifat Movement. Although they did eventually renew their offer the British were ever mindful of this reluctance and disbanded the regiment in 1919. The soldiers were either absorbed into other regiments or returned to Punjab with gratuity and pensions. Nand Singh most probably returned home having proved his 'Namak Halali' but ironically with a seditious label.

The beauty of the Jangnamah narrative is that it reveals the soldiers' courage in its most naked form, celebrating their ability brave fear and continue against the odds. Nand Singh sustains this tradition and writes:

*“Death holds no fear for us, what honour is it to fall abaft holding the Saber fine?
After raising the Sarkar's rifle, what honour is it to fright and whine?”*

*Die thyself or kill thy enemy, what honour is it to war without all thy might?
After enlisting on the rolls, what honour is it to fear the death or even its sight?”*

*Seeking to prove the loyalty, what honour is it hold back from the battle field?
Never keep the trader's heart, what honour is it to blame the fate and yield?”*

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About the Author

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