

Grade: 7

Course: Virsa (ਵਿਰਸਾ)

Lesson Number: 9

Unit Name: Methods of Survival in the 18th century

Title: Strategy and War Tactics of the Sikhs (ਸਿਖ)

Standards

Standard 2: Methods of Survival in the 18th Century

- Students identify and understand the Sikh guerrilla tactics of the 18th Century and how these were employed to successfully gain political ascendancy.
 - Students understand the battle method of Ḍhāī-Phaṭ (ਢਾਈ ਫਟ) while being introduced to Ratan Singh Bhaṅgū's (ਰਤਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਭੰਗੂ) work. Other important ideas include the implementation of the Rākhī (ਰਾਖੀ) system and undermining of the foreign authorities.

Objectives

1. Students will be introduced to the methods of survival in the 18th century, with focus on their strategy and war tactics.
2. In particular, students will be introduced to the method of Ḍhāī-Phaṭ and the Rākhī system.

Prerequisites

- Students should be familiar with major events of 18th century Sikh history such as the Vaḍā and Choṭā Ghalūghārā (ਵਡਾ ਅਤੇ ਛੋਟਾ ਘਲੂਘਾਰਾ) and the invasions of Ahmad Shāh Abdālī (ਅਹਮਦ ਸ਼ਾਹ ਅਬਦਾਲੀ) and Nādir Shāh (ਨਾਦਿਰ ਸ਼ਾਹ).

Materials

- Article entitled “Strategy and the War Tactics of the Sikhs”

Advanced Preparation

- The teacher should be familiar with Ratan Singh Bhaṅgū's work, its usefulness as a historical source as well as its limitations.

Engagement (15-20 minutes)

- Greet students and give them a couple of minutes to settle down and take out their notebooks.
- Students should already be familiar with the major events of the 18th century so the teacher should begin the class by reminding students that this was a turbulent time for the Sikhs in Pañjāb (ਪੰਜਾਬ). They experienced a brief period of success at the beginning of the 18th century under the leadership of Bandā Singh Bahādar (ਬੰਦਾ ਸਿੰਘ ਬਹਾਦਰ) but were again victimized by the Mughal government until they managed to gain control in the area by reorganizing themselves into *Misals*. In the middle years of the 18th century, many Sikhs were forced to leave their homes and live in the jungles, the more famous one known as Lakkhī (ਲੱਖੀ) jungle, the sandy deserts of Rājputānā (ਰਾਜਪੁਤਾਨਾ) and the forests of the Shivālik (ਸ਼ਿਵਾਲਿਕ) Hills. They faced persecution under Zakrīā Khān (ਜ਼ਕਰੀਆ ਖਾਨ) and Yāhīā Khān (ਯਾਹੀਆ ਖਾਨ); many Sikhs were massacred in the Vaḍā and Choṭā Ghalūghārā and were sentenced to death when captured because they would not give up their faith.
- After giving this brief account of Sikh persecution, ask students to think about the options that the Sikh community had at this point in history.
 - Ask students to imagine that they are members of the Sikh community during this period

- of persecution, what would they do?
- Would they continue to remain in their villages where they are outnumbered? Would they shed the outward signs of the *Khālsā* (ਖ਼ਾਲਸਾ) and try to help out the militant groups?
- Would they remain in their villages and hope that their neighbours would help them?
- Would they abandon their homes and take up arms?
- The teacher should encourage a healthy discussion by reminding students to discuss their options respectfully. Explain to students that it is okay to disagree with others and that no one should be attacked for their point of view.

Exploration (35 minutes)

- After the discussion, tell students that while some Sikhs shed the outward signs of the *Khālsā*, an overwhelming number chose to leave their homes in an attempt to protect themselves and their families as well as their faith.
- In their struggle for survival, Sikh bands or *Jathās* (ਜਥਾ) developed innovative battle strategies that helped them persevere against large militaries despite their meager numbers.
- In order to provide students with an understanding of Sikh strategies during this time, get students to read the article entitled “Strategy and the War Tactics of the Sikhs” so that they get a sense of what steps the Sikh *Jathās* took to ensure their survival against great odds.
- Students should read the article on their own and highlight the most important points. Once all the students have read the article, the teacher should lead a large class discussion asking students to describe the strategies that the Sikhs used against the various invaders.
- There are two concepts in the article the teacher should address: *Ḍhāī-Phaṭ* and *Rākhī*.
- The article contains information about each concept but the teacher should explain the fact that *Ḍhāī-Phaṭ* means “two and a half injuries/strokes”. The teacher should illustrate this concept by discussing what each *Phaṭ* is, getting students to note that: One *phaṭ* is the surprise attack on a Mughal force, the second *phaṭ* is the speedy withdrawal after the damage has been done, and the half *Phaṭ* is the shock and damage that the enemy forces receive from another short, surprise attack.
- The other concept that the teacher should take care to stress is the system of *Rākhī* (the word literally means “protection”). The teacher should explain that by charging locals for protection against Mughal forces, the Sikhs were not only able to develop political dominance in these regions, but were also able to fund their fighting, survival and indeed protection of the weak.

Explanation/ Extension (5-10 minutes)

- The in-depth explanation of the article will probably take the entire class period, but if there is extra time left over, ask students to think about the battle strategies of the Sikhs in the 18th centuries in terms of how these strategies might actually be implemented by the *jathedārs*.
- What kinds of things would have to be taken into consideration when using the *Ḍhāī-Phaṭ* battle tactic? What all could go wrong? What measures would Sikhs have to take in order to insure that they did as much damage as possible without suffering too many losses?

Evaluation (On-going)

- Get students to answer the following questions after reading the article:
 - How do we know about Sikh battle plans and strategies?
 - Describe the *Rākhī* system and list three advantages of the *Rākhī* system for the Sikhs.
 - What was the true objective of Ahmad Shāh Abdālī’s repeated invasions of India? How did the Sikhs take advantage of his objective?
 - What were the new elements that Sikhs introduced to North Indian warfare during the 18th century?

Teacher Resources

- Strategy and War Tactics of the Sikhs, Sikh-history. February 28th, 2007. http://www.sikh-history.com/sikhhist/events/war_strategy.html
- Guptā, H.R. Origin of Sikh Territorial Chieftainships, 1748-59. The *Khālsā & the Pañjāb*. New Dillī: Tulikā Books, 2002. (p 42-54)
- Guptā, Harī Rām. History of the Sikhs. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, January 1999.

Strategy and War Tactics of the Sikhs (ਸਿਖ)

The Sikh guerilla leaders have left behind no account of their designs and deliberations. The contemporary historians, who cared to take notice of their military activities, have merely described what they heard and saw and not what the Sikhs had thought and planned. Consequently, there is little direct evidence available with respect to the strategy of the Sikhs and their battle plans, although there is enough evidence available from which these can be inferred. The strategy of the Sikhs becomes sufficiently obvious if we closely follow the course of their battles and correlate their tactics with their objectives. While formulating their strategy they seem to have taken into account the obvious factors, such as, their own objectives and those of their enemies, as also the character and composition of the enemy forces and the real source of his strength.

Strategy against the Mughals

The Mughals were imperialist-expansionist type of invaders. The real strength of the Mughal empire lay not in its army but in the vast resources of Hindostān. The Sikhs seem to have realized this. They, accordingly, devised such a strategy that focused on denying them these resources. To begin with, the Sikhs persuaded the peasants to withhold payment of land revenue to the Mughals. Where persuasion failed, as it failed more often than it succeeded in initial stages, they resorted to calculated terrorism in the countryside. They raided the villages and plundered the landlords, the moneylenders, the revenue officers and the hostile peasantry. Consequently the land revenue collection went down. Ratan Singh Bhaṅgū (ਰਤਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਭੰਗੂ), whose *Panth Prakāsh* (ਪੰਥ ਪ੍ਰਕਾਸ਼) is based on contemporary oral evidence, has thus summed up the military implications of this economic warfare of the Sikhs: “Land revenue, the Mughals could collect none as the peasants refused to pay any on the grounds that they had already been robbed of their produce by the Sikhs. The Mughals, as they could not collect enough taxes, had little money to pay to their soldiers who consequently deserted them. And tell me if anyone can collect revenue from the peasants without being able to enforce recovery?” None could, at least not in those days.

The Sikhs also infested the trade-routes and plundered the merchants on the move. They frequently raided the *Sarāms* (ਸਰਾਂ) or the inns and the ferry sites. Within a few years they were, thus, able to close the highways to trade and traffic. Merchants avoided the *Pañjāb* (ਪੰਜਾਬ) plains and preferred to take their goods through the hill states of *Jammū* (ਜੰਮੂ) and *Kāngrā* (ਕਾਂਗੜਾ). This resulted in sizeable loss of income to the state from customs and transit duties. The third target of the Sikhs were the escorts carrying state revenues from the *Parganāhs* (ਪਰਗਨਾਹ) (the revenue estates) to the districts and hence to *Lāhaur* (ਲਾਹੌਰ) and *Dillī* (ਦਿੱਲੀ). They ambushed the escorts, raided their camping sites and plundered them in everyway. Thus, they strove to block the flow of wealth to the capital, a center where it generated power. This economic warfare waged by the Sikhs had far-reaching political and military implications. The Mughal economic system, primitive as it was, was not capable of bearing the burden of a disruptionist war of slow destruction. Consequently, it broke down under strain, and with it collapsed the *Mansabdārī* (ਮਨਸਬਦਾਰੀ) and *Jagīrdārī* (ਜਗੀਰਦਾਰੀ) systems, which were the backbone of the Mughal military system. These barons, the *Mansabdārs* and the *Jagīrdārs*, when

they failed to collect the revenues assigned to them, also failed to raise and furnish stipulated contingents for the royal army.

The Sikhs further combined their economic strategy with the political and evolved a system of taking control of the population through the Rākhī (ਰਾਖੀ) system. Those were the days when confusion and anarchy reigned in Pañjāb. There was virtually no government and the law of the jungle prevailed. People had become an easy prey to anyone who chose to oppress them. The common man lived in constant dread of the invading hordes of the Afgān robber-soldiers, the professional robbers, the Sikhs, and the worse-than-robber revenue collectors. “Revenue administration there was none; the cultivator followed the plough with a sword in his hand, the Collector came at the head of a regiment, and if he fared well, another soon followed him to pick up the crumbs.” “Society lived in a sort of trustless truce broken from time to time by treacherous murders and thievish forays.” In such times the Sikhs offered to protect the people on payment of a nominal ‘protection fee’, the Rākhī. In return they were not only to refrain themselves; they were also to restrain others and to protect the people from all types of raiders. In the areas thus brought under the Rākhī system raids were prevented, disputes settled and justice (rough and ready) meted out. In this way the Sikhs took over all the police functions of the state, which were the only functions of the state in those days. Thus, the people got relief and respite and the Sikhs got an opportunity to prove that they meant to rule. Politically, the Rākhī system made them saviors of the people; economically it assured them of regular legal income; and militarily, it put their organization on sound footing. In terms of guerilla strategy, it meant an onslaught on the stable image of the Mughal Empire and the staying power of the Afgān occupation forces.

In terms of pure military strategy, the Sikhs made the mercenary spirit of the Mughal soldiers, their principal target. The so-called Mughal army of the Pañjāb Governors of those days was mainly composed of the Iranian, Turk and other Central Asian mercenaries. Individually though, these soldiers were brave and reckless, their weakness lay in their mercenary spirit and their lack of loyalty to their Prince and the country of their employer. They had no direct stake in the outcome of the battle and consequently had little interest in serious fighting.

They frequently changed sides and often made off on the slightest pretext of reverse. Even in the midst of an offensive they were actually on the defensive because they were always keen to save their horses, the loss of which ruined them irretrievably: If they lost their animal they also lost the trooper’s extra allowance. The Sikhs were different. Soldiering was not their livelihood; it was a political necessity and a religious duty for them. The Sikhs believed in a war of mutual extermination; for them capitulation was ruled out. They were, thus, able to turn the contest of arms into a clash of wills, and such was their success that “fifty of them were enough to keep at bay a whole battalion of the King’s forces”.

Strategy against Ahmad Shāh Abdālī (ਅਹਮਦ ਸ਼ਾਹ ਅਬਦਾਲੀ)

Ahmad Shāh Abdālī, except that he wanted to annex the Pañjāb to his Afgān Empire, had little political ambitions in India. After his fourth invasion (1756-1757), when the Mughal Empire lay prostrate at his feet, he made no effort to capture it even though Shatbā (ਸ਼ਤਬਾ) (the prayer for the new King) was read in his name. He merely plundered in and around Dillī (ਦਿੱਲੀ) and while returning, he restored the throne to the vanquished Mughal Emperor, Ahmad Shāh. Even in the Pañjāb he tried to establish his direct rule only once (May 1757-April 1758), and frequently plundered it, although it was his province ever since 1752. To Ahmad Shāh war did not mean an extension of politics; it meant, at best, a means of extortion through politics. And, to his Baluch-Afgān group, it simply meant an organized plunder, a trade by arms. The main objective of the repeated invasions of Ahmad Shāh Abdālī was to plunder the wealth of India and to carry it to Afghanistan. It was so apparent from

his conduct that every Pañjābī understood it, as is clear from their common saying: ‘Those born in Kābul are our regular guests.’

The Sikhs, although they were not the first people to understand the true object of the repeated invasions of Ahmad Shāh were certainly the only ones who decided to frustrate it. Their technique was simple: they robbed the robber. Initially, they concentrated on plundering raids involving little fighting, and subsequently, they combined serious fighting with plundering. They hung loosely around the Afgān army making use of every opportunity of plunder that fell in their way. Whenever it suited them to take the part of assailants, they fell upon the Afgān baggage train and on their convoys, relieving the Afgāns of much of their booty. Further, they hovered round the Afgān camp cutting off stragglers and intercepting supplies. They also ambushed the foraging parties and plundering detachments which ventured away from the main Afgān force. As their strength increased, their raids grew both in frequency and ferocity. They made frontal attacks on the Afgān vanguard, and towards the close of their struggle they did not spare even the main Afgān force. The Sikhs, thus, frequently aimed their blow at the robber instinct of the Afgān soldiers and hit his mind and morale through his belly. Over a period of time the Sikhs were, thus, able to convince the Afgāns that while it was easy to plunder in India, it was difficult and risky to convey the booty through the Pañjāb. This way, they made the Afgān trade by arms unprofitable.

The Sikhs never permitted themselves to be maneuvered into a pitched battle of sufficiently long duration with Abdālī’s forces. They would only offer him a battle when Abdālī was not in a position to accept it, either due to the urgency of returning home or because his soldiers were already exhausted. Defensively, the plan best adopted by them was to offer nothing tangible to the enemy to attack. They never tried to impede the advance of Ahmad Shāh except on few occasions in which they suffered heavy losses. They appeared where he was not, threatening his base camp or the advance guard, and disappeared as soon as the main Afgān force arrived on the scene. This way they exhausted and demoralized the Afgān soldiers and then, as usual, confronted them with battle when they were eager to return home. Although the Sikhs could never achieve a decisive victory over Ahmad Shāh in this manner, he ultimately lost. “Guerrillas never win wars but their adversaries often lose them.”

Tactics and combat method

The tactics of the Sikhs were not static and were usually worked out by the men on the spot. Ratan Siṅgh, whose account is based on contemporary oral evidence, was told by a former veteran that one basic tactic of the Sikhs was: “Hit the enemy hard enough to kill, run, turn back and hit him again; run again, hit and run till you exasperate the enemy, and then, melt away.” Their entire theory of war is summed up in the word Ḍhāī-Phaṭ (ਢਾਈ ਫਟ) or two and a half injuries. They considered approach, and all that goes into the making of it when element of surprise is to be secured, as one secret of success. This they called one phaṭ or injury and regarded it 40 per cent of their battle activity. The half phaṭ was the sudden swift shock action which put the enemy off his balance. Then they suddenly withdrew before the enemy could strike back and disappeared to where he could not chase them. They considered speedy and orderly withdrawal to be the second secret of success or the other complete Phaṭ. Kāzī Nūr Muhammed (ਕਾਜ਼ੀ ਨੂਰ ਮੁਹੰਮਦ), who fought against the Sikhs, sums up their science of war as follows: ‘To face the enemy like a hero and then to get safely out of action.’

They practiced all types of harassing tactics such as ambush, dusk and dawn raids, but their favorite was to lead the enemy into baited traps. Unable to destroy the whole Afgān force, and unwilling to let it remain intact, they devised a method of killing it bit by bit. With this object in view they would lure a section of the enemy to chase them, and when this section was cut off from the main force, they would wheel round and encircle it. When facing the main Afgān force, a party of them would gallop

forward and come to a sudden stop to discharge its muskets. Then they would wheel round, making room for the others, and thus they kept up uninterrupted fire and smashed the enemy lines. Forster says that their mode of attack was different from that of any other cavalry in Asia. In those days, when retreat meant rout and dispersal meant defeat, the Sikhs successfully dispersed to operate and returned to renew the attack. These were entirely new elements which the Sikhs introduced in the north Indian warfare of the period under review.

Source: http://www.sikh-history.com/sikhhist/events/war_strategy.html

Adapted From: Gupta, Hari Ram. History of the Sikhs. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, January 1999

meantime, a desperate appeal for help was sent to Peshāvar through a Sikh woman disguised as a Paṭhān.

Harī Singh Nalvā rose from his sick bed and made his way to Jamraud. The Afgāns were frightened to see the terrible Nalvā's approach. They raised the siege of Jamraud and took up position in the valley of Khaibar. Harī Singh Nalvā drew up his forces in battle formation and waited for seven days for the Afgāns to attack. When Nalvā realized that the Afgāns were afraid to fight, he ordered the Pañjābīs to advance. The engagement took place on April 30, 1837. The Pañjābīs drove the Afgāns before them as the wind drives leaves. Dost Muhammad's son, Muhammad Akbar Khān (ਮੁਹੰਮਦ ਅਕਬਰ ਖਾਨ), who was watching the Afgān catastrophe saw that Nalvā had gone well ahead of his army. Akbar Khān swooped on the advance column. Nalvā was fatally wounded in this commotion, but his death was kept a secret until the enemy had been defeated, and driven beyond the mouth of Khaibar.

Harī Singh Nalvā lived and died for the glory of the Khālsā empire. He fought many battles and rose to the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Khālsā forces. He was allowed to strike a coin in his name at Kashmīr (ਕਸ਼ਮੀਰ) and at Peshāvar. He served as the Governor of Kashmīr and Hazārā, and was the Governor of Peshāvar until the end of his life.

Adapted from: The Gurū's Word & Illustrated Sikh History

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Strategy against Ahmad Shāh Abdālī (ਅਹਮਦ ਸ਼ਾਹ ਅਬਦਾਲੀ)

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