

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 Singh, 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