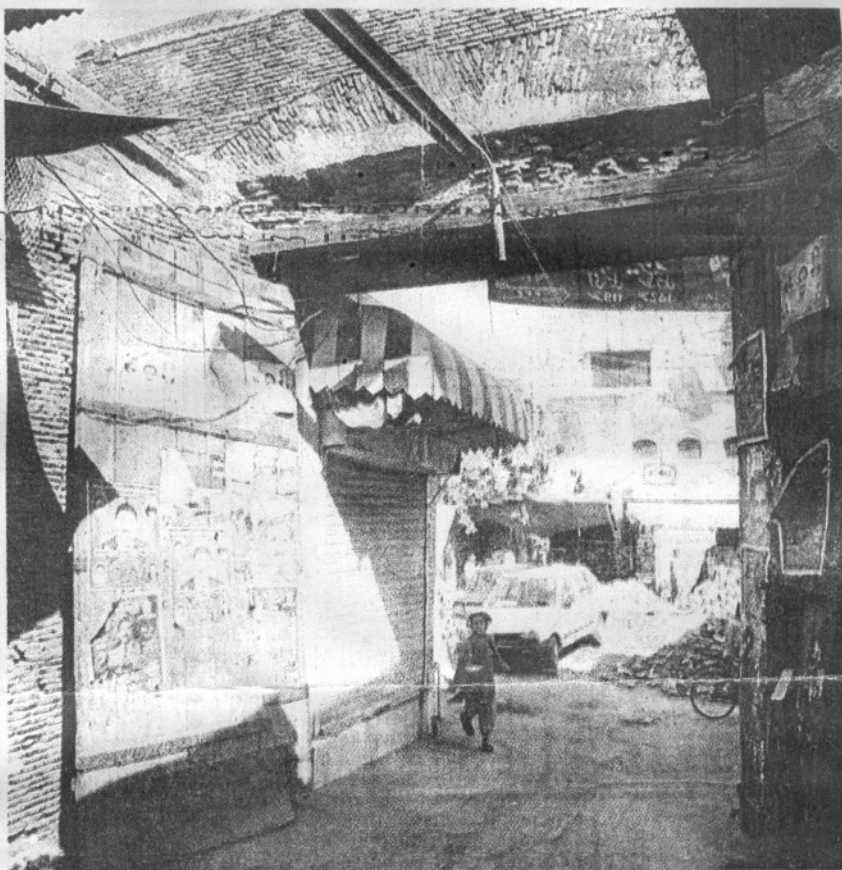


Three jathaidars of Lahore

The Sikh rule in Lahore is remembered as a period of chaos and destruction. An account of the plundering of the city and its surrounding during those times

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by Captain Syed Birjees Asghar

After the death of Aurangzeb, the sixth great Moghul, in 1707 AD the centre at Delhi started losing its political and economic power due to infighting amongst his sons and their successors. Intrigues and conspiracies at the court further weakened the structure of the state, giving rise to separatist provinces, which became powerful and independent.

Punjab followed a similar path. The gateway to the subcontinent, the province, was sometimes ruled by the centre through its appointed governors, and, on occasions by Kabul. The Afghans had destabilised the Moghuls

at Delhi, as did the Sikhs who had taken up arms against Delhi as well as Kabul. Lahore was the prize for any invading force, be it Afghans externally or the Sikhs internally.

Banda Bairagi, a Sikh zealot, made it his mission to avenge the murder of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the last guru of Sikhism. With his co-religionists, he traveled all the way from Deccan to the Punjab, plundering village after village, murdering the Muslim populace in a manner which was repeated in 1947 in East Punjab. He razed Sirhind, Kalanaur, Vattala, Duaba districts; and in the times of Bahadur Shah, destroyed every thing in the vicinity of Lahore. The heavy fortifications and artillery mounted on the outer wall saved the city. Lahore's suburbs were devastated and the

populace in the inner city psychologically wrecked.

Nadir Shah Quli from Iran, who called himself Nadir Shah, son of 'Talwar' (sword), invaded these lands in 1738. Before drawing blood at Delhi, his troops camped at Shalamar, Lahore. Governor Zakria Khan's diplomacy and Rs. two million contributed by the citizens of Lahore kept the Iranians away from the city. The localities around the city were looted and plundered once again.

Ahmed Shah Abdali invaded the subcontinent seven times between 1748 and 1767. When he occupied Lahore in 1748, the city and the localities surrounding it were again plundered. Ahmed Shah would invade again and again to punish his appointee deviant governors or to chase the Sikhs who plundered these lands soon after his return to Kabul or to suppress the Marhattas and draw his pound of flesh from the Delhi Sarkar.

The Sikhs had worked all this time to occupy Lahore. For the first time they took control of this city in 1756 under Jassa Singh Kallai. Another painful period for the people of Lahore. Luckily the Marhattas ousted Kallal next year.

After Ahmed Shah's sixth invasion in 1764, Sikhs again appeared from their hideouts — three warlords named Gujjar Singh, Lehna Singh (both from the powerful Bhangi Misl Sikh tribe) and Sobhha Singh. Allowalia turned out Ahmed Shah's governor Kabuli Mull and took control of Lahore.

Their armies looted Lahore and then ruled it as their fiefdom.

The three men divided the city amongst themselves. The area between Shalamar and the city was taken over by Gujjar Singh who built a fort for himself which still exists in Lahore, nothing more than an over-inhabited locality and mohallas today. The gate of the fort still is in place.

Lehna Singh established himself in the Lahore Fort. The area around Roshnai gate, Kashmiri gate, Masti and Khiziri gates, most of the inner city, fell to him. Sobhha Singh established his control over Nawankot and Mozang areas, establishing his court at Bagh Zubaida Begum, the present non-existing Chauburji gardens.

Their thirty years rule in the city was a period of great difficulties for the Lahorites. Only one third of the city was left inhabited — mohalla after mohalla was vacated and the residents left to escape the three occupiers. Lahore's suburbs had already been plundered and destroyed by Sikh and Afghan incursions. It was a ghost city on which the three rulers let themselves loose. Whenever they needed money, it came from the subjects. Theirs was a period of chaos and destruction.

Perhaps the word 'Sikhashahi' originated in the times of these Jathaidars (warlords) and the word 'Sikh Burchhi gurd' (the machetes carriers) was used to describe the three rulers.

The Jathaidars were dispossessed of Lahore with the arrival of their co-religionist Ranjeet Singh in 1798 with the approval of Shah Zaman, the new ruler of Kabul. Another era started for Lahore. But the worst was yet to come!

history

