

The 'hotspur' of the Lahore Darbar

ONE of the most intriguing incident in the entire history of the Lahore Fort has been the manner in which an important archway between the Hazuri Bagh and the fort at Roshnai Gate collapsed in 1840 without any apparent reason. There are several versions to the collapse, as well as some folk legend.

The collapse took place just after the cremation of Maharajah Kharrak Singh, the son of Maharajah Ranjit Singh, just outside the Lahore Fort. As the ruling Sikh elite walked back to the fort after the cremation, the heir-apparent Naunehal Singh, accompanied by Udham Singh, son of Maharajah Gulab Singh of Kashmir, led the procession. As soon as they reached the archway, it suddenly, and mysteriously, collapsed, killing both princes of Punjab and Kashmir in a tragedy that shook both States and led to their ultimate collapse. Was it intrigue or was it sheer accident, this is a question that has vexed many an expert. Let us examine the folk legend that still takes the rounds of the old walled city of Lahore. It exists in the shape of a phrase: "Whether if tell or was made to fall, for in it perished Naunehal". Such old sayings are now dying out themselves, and need to be recorded for the sake of future research. But the few that can be recorded in such columns add so much to our understanding of how people felt in those days.

According to a description of the incident by Kanhiyya Lal, once Maharajah Kharrak Singh became the ruler, the Dogra family that was so powerful in the Lahore Darbar, started intriguing against the new Maharajah. The death of the all powerful Maharajah Ranjit Singh, who ruled for a full 40 years, had left a massive power vacuum. Anyone of any consequence was trying to read just in a more powerful slot. Intrigue reigned supreme. The powerful Dogras had managed to find a power ally in the heir-apparent, Prince Naunehal Singh. After they managed to murder Chet Singh, a pretender, they created circum-

stances that led the prince to force his father in confinement at his 'haveli' inside the walled city, and himself became the effective ruler.

Maharajah Kharrak Singh never forgave his son for this treatment, so much so that when he fell ill he refused to let his son come to meet him. In turn, Prince Naunehal Singh began to portray his father as a crazy man, which he certainly was not. He had turned into a mystic, and kept uttering deep meaning sentences, which most people were not able to understand. Others thought they were wise utterances of a very wise man.

It is a fact that the people of the walled city began to take a liking to the imprisoned Maharajah Kharrak Singh. In his confinement he would go round the moballahs of Lahore knocking on windows of Muslims, waking them up to say their prayers. The phrase "Kharrak Singh kay khattaknay say kharrakti hain khirkian" is still uttered by almost all school-going children in Lahore. The sardars of the Lahore Darbar found this to be "utter madness" and they wanted a patch-up. Maharajah Kharrak Singh refused to entertain such thoughts and started telling anyone who came to meet him. "He is stupid if he thinks he will go to the Lord alone. When I go, he will go too". Kanhiyya Lal records as having met a lot of old people in the walled city had heard of this. Another source, a Sikh history website, states that "Kharrak Singh was a mystic who could predict the future and he accurately, to the very date, predicted his own and his son's death". Yet another source describes Kharrak Singh as letting out a loud laugh when told that Naunehal Singh was the effective 'maharajah'. "That day will never come", he would laugh.

There is every reason to believe that Naunehal Singh was party to the slow poisoning of his father. When Kharrak Singh died in 1840, he was cremated just next to where his father was. After the cremation as the hyperactive Naunehal

Singh was walking back to the Lahore Fort for his certain enthronement as maharajah of the Punjab, the archway under which he as passing collapsed and he was buried alive along with the Udham Singh. Here it would be interesting to take up the description of Col. H.R. Golding: The British called him the hotspur of the Punjab. The fall of the archway has been attributed to some design... as the sikh courtiers tried to conceal the injuries to the heir-apparent, conspiracy was feared. But the precise timing of the fall certainly does not seem accidental. Gulab Singh is feared a having engineered it. But then his own son perished, which is inconsistent with the motives of Gulab Singh."

Yet another scholar has described the death of Naunehal Singh in the following terms: "once the cremation of Kharak Singh was over, a gun salute followed which shook the grounds of the fort. At this moment the heir-apparent was in a hurry to leave and start his enthronement. The vibrations of the cannons dislodged the already damaged archway, and it so happened that it collapsed just when Naunehal Singh and Udham Singh were passing under it. The theory of a conspiracy is most unlikely." Sounds a logical theory, even though archways as strong as those of the Lahore Fort are not known to collapse from the thunder of a cannon. But then the mystery remains.

The samadhs of Kharrak Singh and Naunehal Singh are both in the same room, where their ashes are under to small domes just next to that of Maharajah Ranjit Singh. Together rests three generations of the most powerful family ever seen in the Punjab. The first was a pragmatic ruler, the second a mystic and the third a 'hotspur'. In modern terms he could be called a misguided missile that helped end the very dynasty that raised him. In Lahore the first is till admired, the second is loved by those who know about him, while the third has been forgotten. — MAJID SHEIKH