

The horse that led Lahore to wars

Lahore Dawn 26-1-02

By Majid Sheikh

IT MIGHT sound amazing today that an entire street of the Walled City of Lahore was cleaned and scrubbed for two whole days just because a horse had to pass that way. It was no religious ceremony, but just the immense passion of horseman who felt more comfortable in his saddle than on his feet.

Almost 200 years ago when the Sukerchakian chief from Gujranwala, Ranjit Singh, declared himself the maharajah of the Punjab in the Lahore Fort on Muharram 10, 1799, the day he conquered the city, he declared that any man with any pride must give top priority to his horses, his work and his women, in that order. If you have visited the Lahore Fort, you will notice to the left of the side entrance a British military barrack. Before the British built this barrack, this was the stable of the Lahore Darbar.

At any one time Maharajah Ranjit Singh could keep almost 1,000 of the very finest horses there. When he ran out of space they went into the Hazoori Bagh, and when that was not enough the horses went into the Badshahi Masjid. Such was the craze of the man

who ruled the Punjab for a full 40 years with an iron grip, and rule he did with great wisdom. For a beautiful horse, or a beautiful woman, he would go to any length, for once he got it into his head to acquire the "filly", it became an obsession with him. Sounds rather logical to any Punjabi male chauvinist.

But one horse stands out from any other in the history of the Punjab and Lahore. The maharajah had heard a lot about this legendary horse and vowed to get it no matter what the cost. In the end it cost him "rupees 60 lakh and 12,000 soldiers," or so the traveller Baron Charles Ilugel quotes Ranjit Singh having told him so himself. By current gold standards that would be almost Rs12 billion and a whole division of infantry. The accounts of the Fakir family of Bazaar Hakeeman also corroborate this figure, actually put it even higher. What was, after all, so amazing about a horse that the Lahore Darbar went crazy to acquire it? After all, the maharajah had a large stable of Arabian thoroughbreds, not to speak of legendary horses like Gauharbar and Sufaid Pari, both of which are said to have "the speed of the wind". Not a single horse in his stable was then worth less than Rs20,000 by the rupees standard 200 years ago. A joke doing the rounds of Lahore then listed the price of the entire city of Lahore and the cost of

the Maharajah's horses as being equal.

This legendary horse was known as Asp-i-Laila and belonged to the Barakzai tribe chiefs, either Dost Muhammad or Yar Muhammad, it is not clear from a number of records consulted. It was a pure Persian breed, jet black in colour and a "sight to watch." Its speed was legendary in the whole of the Khyber Pass, and what intrigued Maharajah Ranjit Singh was the fact that it was known for its intelligence. The news of this 'great' horse reached the Lahore Darbar sometime in 1822. Immediately Ranjit Singh dispatched intelligence agents to find out where the horse was located. One account put it at Peshawar, while another stated that the Barakzais had heard of the interest of the maharajah from their agents in Lahore, and had shifted the horse to Kabul. This single horse led to a full scale war between the Punjab and Afghanistan.

In 1822, the maharajah sent his special minister Fakir Azizuddin to Peshawar to collect tribute from Yar Muhammad and among the gifts were some very fine horses. But Asp-i-Laila was not among them. On query, Yar Muhammad told him that he did not own the horse. This angered the maharajah who set up a whole team of agents to track down the horse. Once he was sure the horse was alive and well and in Yar Muhammad's possession, discreet negotiations were

conducted. By 1828 the patience of the maharajah was exhausted and he sent a punitive force under Sardar Budh Singh Sandhawalia to acquire the horse. In the battle Budh Singh and hundreds of his soldiers were killed, but the Lahore Darbar won the battle after the two French generals Allard and Ventura, now buried in Lahore in Old Anarkali, were sent with another force to assist Budh Singh's force.

At the surrender the French generals were told that Asp-i-Laila was not there. In a rage, they arrested Yar Muhammad's brother and held him hostage. In the end, the fierce Pathans told the French generals that the horse was dead. This sent the maharajah into a fit of rage, and he sent another punitive expedition under Sardar Kharak Singh to Peshawar, where his agents informed the horse now was. But before Kharak Singh could reach Peshawar, Yar Muhammad was killed by his own tribe for fighting over a horse, and his brother Sultan Muhammad fled for his own safety.

In 1830, Maharajah Ranjit Singh installed Sultan Muhammad as governor of Peshawar. Gen Ventura at that point asked for Asp-i-Laila, which demand the new governor spurned. Gen Ventura immediately arrested the new governor in his own palace and informed him that within 24 hours he would be beheaded. Gen Ventura had

built a fire for executing scores of prisoners in Hazirabad, and he took the horse to Lahore. At this time the maharajah had agreed to hand over the city and on doing so, "cried like a child." The horse was immediately carried to Lahore in a special carriage guarded by well over 500 soldiers.

It reached Lahore at the western Akbari Gate of the Lahore Fort, and the road that comes from Badami Bagh and curves around the fort was all cleaned and scrubbed for two days in advance, and the order was that not a single speck of dust should enter the horse's nostrils. And so Asp-i-Laila reached Lahore, and the maharajah feasted his eyes on the horse and commented: "It has been worth the trouble." One account puts the colour as jet black, as the name Asp-i-Laila suggests, another makes it dark grey. But no matter what the colour was, the horse had the honour of not only wearing the Koh-i-Noor diamond around its neck on special occasions, but of also being the horse that was brought out on special occasions.

It was also the last horse the maharajah ever rode. He was lifted in illness and put in the saddle. Once there he was fine, for he was a natural horseman. No horse in history, so the legend then went, has had more spent on it than the acquisition of the Lahore Darbar.