

The Forgotten Koh-i-Noors of Ranjit Singh

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§1. The Koh-i-Noor is well-known, and the Sikhs amongst the tourists viewing the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London know too that it was stolen by the British from a descendant of Ranjit Singh, and some get so excited, *they want the bauble returned to where it belongs : but is this a good idea, will we be able to **take care** of it ?*

I pose this question because *we already have – right here in Chandigarh now – a heritage of Ranjit Singh worth many Koh-i-Noors, which we have only taken care to assiduously neglect so far!*

Many years ago I stumbled by sheer chance in the Panjab University Library on a book by **Sita Ram Kohli** full of minutiae about the Darbar Khalsa. My mind was on something else, and that summer afternoon even hotter than usual. Still, standing and sweating in the shelves, I had for quite some time searched its pages in vain for a certain name ... However I did not get the book issued out then, I had returned to whatever—presumably some mathematics—had taken me to the library that day.

If you have read [The Forgotten Shaheeds of Dagshai \(2007\)](#) I don't have to tell you why this incident left Sita Ram Kohli imprinted on my mind. I live in a society not only traditionally bad at keeping records, but also proud of it : even our historians are not bothered about citations! *Yet here was an exception who had put in a hard long slog and catalogued all the records of a bygone era ...* An era well before the events in Dagshai that I looked into, but even about these, and some other events in the Punjab of the early 1900's, my experience uniformly has been that, *even precisely cited items are very hard to obtain from our archives and other offices, it might take forever ...*

That some records from the early 1800's were now in Phillaur and in a bad way, I'd been hearing off and on for long ... so *I'd presumed that Kohli's catalogue was a catalogue of records lost ... Not so! The Khalsa Darbar records—at least most of them—still exist, and are in Chandigarh itself, but at some point in time, probably 1965, were bound and re-numbered in such a curious manner that the precise number from Kohli's catalogue is quite inadequate to determine where exactly that item is to be found now ...*

These archives mention Kohli's catalogue on their website, but there is nothing about how those bundles of folios were in fact bound into volumes and re-numbered : so even Kohli scholars and foreign archivists are under the impression that his numbers still apply. However there is *one crucial photocopy of Kohli's catalogue*, available in these archives only, in which there are *some notings in pen and pencil*, made by someone when these folios were sent out to the binder, which will tell you roughly, *say within 100 to 300 pages*, where what you went looking for is now located.

Which is still not too bad if you are a fluent reader of the language in which these records were kept, viz., *Persian or Farsi*, in the *shikasta* style. If, like me, you don't know even

the alphabet, then it all hinges on the friendly and helpful archivist, Parminder Kaur Sandhu, who studied *Urdu* – a different language whose script is like that of Farsi – up to matriculation, and who has by practice learnt to make out—if you don't interrupt her and let her concentrate—an occasional proper name in these records ...

Here very briefly – this because I must return full-time and soon to the very exciting mathematics that I was in the midst of – is how I came by this information.

§2. Two events – see Notes – combined to remind me recently of Sita Ram Kohli, and I decided that I should—*this time in the comfort of my home and less hurriedly*—browse that book of his once again ... so here was I turning, as my bed-time reading one night, page after page of the *Catalogue of Khalsa Darbar Records, vol. 2 (1927)* ... *and this time my search was not in vain!* I recall that it was about 45 minutes into June 21, 2014 when I saw *baráwurd Dhum Singh* first on **page 62**, and then soon after on **page 71**. This process was completed the next night with a third occurrence found on **page 190**. A week or so later **vol. 1 (1919)** of his book was also available to me, and I subjected it to a similar perusal, but found no occurrence of this name in it.

Here are [the scans of these pages](#). The particular payroll records—that's what *baráwurd* means—that interest me most are, per Kohli's catalogue, **Bu8(i) (iv)(b) (6)** folios 2, **Bu9 (iv)(b) (11)** folio 1, and **Bu24 (iv)(a) (18)** folios 9. Each year's records made a **Bundle** -- but besides Bu8(i) there is also Bu8(ii) pertaining to the annexation of Multan that year -- and under **(iv)(a)** is *Mawajib Sówári*, the amounts paid to the Irregular Cavalry, while **(iv)(b)** gives us *Mawajib Piyáda*, the amounts paid to the Irregular Infantry. As you can see, the name that interests me is at **(6)**, **(11)** and **(18)** in these lists, with 2, 1 and 9 folios respectively. *Are any of these folios about that daredevil with the same name from Patiala who, it is said, had served gallantly for long in the Sarkar Khalsa's army?*

A web-search then disabused me of the notion that the records themselves were lost: they managed to make their way during the partition of 1947 from Lahore to Simla, then in 1959 were shifted to Patiala, and in 1984 again for some reason to Amritsar, and then -- maybe about ten to fifteen years later -- yet again from there to *Punjab State Archives, Sector 38, Chandigarh*, where they are located now.

It was as if not one but all the koh-i-noors of the Sarkar Khalsa had walked up, through the mists of history, to almost my doorstep!

§3. However, just because you have a precise citation is no reason to get excited here, you must make due preparations and be patient ... So it was only on July 15, 2014 that Minni—my wife's people-skills are far superior to mine—and I went to see the friendly archivist, but on that day she barely glanced at my application, or at the copies of the above pages 62, 71 and 190 attached to it. Instead, she told us that those 129 bundles had mutated into about 2000 volumes, and that too in such a way that Kohli's catalogue is now of very limited use, unless you know Farsi. Yet, 100 more copies of this out-of-print classic—with no note about what had become of those bundles—have been recently reprinted ... but alas, the copy with some notings in pencil on it, which was sent out from

the archives in this process, never came back from the printer ... and these reprints too, it seemed, were in the locked almirah of someone else who was away that day because of illness, but who knew more and might be able to help her later ...

“*Can I see the Khalsa Darbar Records,*” I asked. “*Yes,*” she replied. Which brings me to the high point of that day. Someone with its key led me into a big strong-room. It had only a couple of fans, but that is par for the course, only I.A.S. officers are kept well air-conditioned, never the precious archives of India. Mercifully however, there were phenol balls aplenty strewn in the racks. *What a miracle it is, I thought, that we have **all these details, not only of kings and captains, but of thousands of common people,** who lived and breathed in that kingdom long ago ... and mind you, this wealth of information is not in hieroglyphics, it is in a living language, albeit written in an old style.* Had Kohli’s precise citations not been rendered so ineffectual, I could have been given at once copies of exactly what I wanted, and I would imagine that it is possible to find a Farsi specialist on the web who, maybe for some consideration per page, could have translated these for me ... But as they say, no use crying over spilt milk! I spent my time making educated guesses as to what three volumes were likely to contain the folios I wanted, and I was allowed to take the three I pulled out back to the archivist’s office.

The three volumes that I plonked for were **B-8(i) vol. IV part-2, B-9 vol. IV part-2 and B-24 vol. IV part-1.** Minni was allowed to take I-phone pictures of the spines, and also of **six pages**—more or less random I thought—from within. Regarding one, the archivist had told us quickly, and more than once, she was sure Dhum Singh was written in it, but somehow her voice seemed to lack conviction. At my telling her that it was so very marvellous that these records still existed, *the archivist agreed and lamented that in all the long, long years that she had been here, only **six people** before us had come wanting to look at these Khalsa Darbar Records!* Then, as we bade her goodbye, she reassured us that she’ll keep trying, but it sure would help if we could find a Farsi reader ...

§4. The next day we learn they still have nothing that will convert Kohli’s numbers to the new ones, so it was all up to us really, we should try to find a fluent reader of the Farsi : but at least *in Chandigarh* this is *a rara avis!* In fact, the don who teaches “Farsi” in P.U. has still not responded to the email I sent him that day, with pics of the above six pages, requesting *only* if he could spot some *proper names* in them? So we now lowered our sights to finding a fluent reader of Urdu in Chandigarh. The ones we personally could think of are however so old we wouldn’t dream of dragging them with us to the archives on a wild goose chase. A number of other people also offered help, but once they had the six images, there was no or negligible feedback.

Two days later Parminder Kaur had better news on the phone for Minni : ***something had been found, you’ll get material!*** So summing it up in a chat with a visitor the day after, I said a copy of this formula or list which converts would be great, but at the very least, the scans of the first and last pages of all the volumes into which each bundle had mutated. For, I reasoned, if the names on these could be made out, a comparison with Kohli will then probably give us the three volumes we should peruse further ...

Days went by ... and we were still waiting ... and to make things worse not one person had come back with a single proper name from those six images ... so I took along with me also *an Urdu primer* when we went out-of-station for some days ... for it seemed that I'd have to do the names-spotting myself ... and when, further, an s.m.s. that Minni got from the archivist on July 24 told us that I would need to make a fresh application because the one already made had been *lost* ... my reaction was “*uh-oh*” ... anyway, another appointment was fixed, but that date fell on Id-ul-Fitr, a holiday, so our second meeting was in fact on the day after this, i.e., on July 30, 2014.

§5. From the above it is clear we went with our hopes not too high, but *this time it was different : the friendly archivist was prepared!* A whole row of volumes—from Bundles 8, 9 and 24—was arrayed in front of her on the table, and she was armed with “**crucial**”, i.e., the crucial photocopy of Kohli's catalogue mentioned in §1. There I told you that the notings made in it offer some help, I'll now develop a bit on that.

A noting in “crucial” told her my first citation was most likely in **B-8(i) vol.V part-1**. Luckily this volume is also one of those with a slip in English, it read : “ *Office slip // Bundle No. 8(i) // vol V // (iv) Mawajib (b) Mawajib Piyada // (c) Sair Jamait // pp. 1-304 // BSNijjer*”. **But which of its 304 pages?** Hoping that the folios were bound after putting them in the order given in Kohli's catalogue—and that none are missing—there should be, we reasoned, $6+3+5+2+3 = 19$ folios before the two we want, so these should be the 20th and the 21st in this volume. *Each folio has one seal of the Sarkar Khalsa*, so counting them is easy, but their lengths vary a lot, the ones we were looking at however had all at most two pages *The page numbers were pencilled in on the folios themselves before the binding*. It was time now for Parminder Kaur to concentrate and see if she could spot that name, and she did! *From the ring of conviction in her voice this time, it seems to me that the following formula has a good chance of being true :*

Bu8(i) (iv)(b) (6) folios 2 = B-8(i) vol.V part-1 pp. 39-42 ?

Likewise, in about the same amount of time, but this time there was no office slip, and distinctly more names-spotting was needed, she declared that :

Bu9 (iv)(b) (11) folio 1 = B-9 vol. VIII part-3 pp. 395-396 ?

Again, going by the conviction in her voice, I'd say this conjecture has about the same chance of being true. The third citation took longer, well over an hour—in *all we were with her from 11:30 a.m to way past 2 p.m*—because “crucial” narrowed the search only to two volumes, despite this office slip : “**Bundle No. 24 // vol XIII // (iv) Mawajib (a) Mawajib Sowari // Date 1891 B.E. (1834 A.D.) pp. 1-458 // BSNijjer**”. Besides, the order of folios in these volumes varies a lot from that in Kohli, and there are some of a different type with apparently no names, while there were long sequences of others in which she could not make out any name ... anyway here it is, the third formula :

Bu24 (iv)(a) (18) folios 9 = B-24 vol. XIII part-1 pp. 123-139 ?

Note that my ‘educated guesses’ were all different from these conjectures. So if these conjectures are true, and the ‘Dhum’ spotted then was also correct, then we have *another occurrence, but this time within a folio?* In fact it is reasonable that there should be many names of this kind in these massive records. These, besides the hundreds given already in the 500 or so pages of Sita Ram Kohli’s catalogue, *are ancestors veritably, I would imagine, of almost all of us living in the Punjab : they all deserve our respect!*

Photocopies of the above $4+2+17 = 23$ pages from the Khalsa Darbar Records were picked up by Minni, on August 1, 2014, from Parminder Kaur’s office; we are very grateful to this friendly archivist for her invaluable assistance.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of my *chachaji*, Gurmukh Singh Sarkaria, who passed away on July 22, 2014.

Notes

1. The first of the ‘two events’ – § 2 – was what I saw on the sideboard outside my office when I returned on May 17, 2014 after some days away. The set of books on it had been replaced by a disjoint set. Which in itself was *not* surprising at all. Minni is given to permuting things in the house without any notice, only the books *in* my office are exempt from these upheavals. What *was* surprising was a book in this set, a book that I had quite forgotten was in our house, but by the same and unforgettable Sita Ram Kohli. This is his last book, “*Sunset of the Sikh Empire,*” published after his death in 1962 after editing by Khushwant Singh. So I made a mental note, but it was only some days later that I brought it inside my office and added it to my overflowing in-tray, viz., books that I intend to read one of these days ... This move was *only* to save it from being dislodged once again by the next, and quite unpredictable, Minni-storm to some other location in the house, *not* because I foresaw actually reading it any time very soon ...

2. The second event was a scan of page 371 of F. S. Aijazuddin, “*The Resourceful Fakirs – Three Muslim Brothers at the Sikh Court of Lahore*” (2014) that my cousin, Gursharan Singh Sidhu, was kind enough to email to me on June 11, 2014. The excerpt is—he wrote—from a letter written by Sher Singh on December 9, 1840 to G. R. Clerk, British Political Agent at Ambala. *In this Sher Singh mentions by name eleven people who had signed a petition to him : ten notables of the Lahore court and a certain Sardar Dhuma Singh Mulwae?* This is exciting : the first name is right, and Patiala is in Malwa, as my cousin had pointed out in his email two days earlier, when he first told me of his discovery.

3. However so absorbed was I in mathematics, that it was only on June 17, 2014 – during a little idle time that I was rewarding myself with after finding something really cute! – that it occurred to me that Kohli’s last book might confirm my cousin’s discovery. So I started leafing its index but only found : “Malwai, Dhana Singh, 11, 31; portion of the village Mauran transferred to, 81.” Not only that, from page 31 and the preceding pages – which are also based on letters from Sher Singh to George Russell Clerk, who was Agent in Ludhiana, not Ambala – *it seems that it was this well-known general who was the eleventh signatory : Dhuma instead of Dhana is a natural enough mis-reading from an old handwritten text, or it could simply be a typo.* There is much more about *Dhana Singh Malwai* in this book (and on the web) for example, from p. 81 et seq., we learn that his roots were in Mauran, a village near Nabha which figured later in a prolonged dispute, and from pp. 10-11 that he was one of the three notables who had taken the ashes of Ranjit Singh and the four unfortunate *satis*—his wives who were burnt alive, it is said of their own volition, with his corpse—for immersion in the Ganges at Hardwar.

4. Having drawn a blank as it were from Kohli’s last book, it was natural for my thoughts to go back to my encounter with Kohli’s first book, and what came out of it—*nothing conclusive but a story incredible as in Incredible India*—I’ve told you already. The paper by H. Kaur, “*Sita Ram Kohli and his works,*” which is on the web gives us an example of a Kohli scholar unaware that those bundles mutated into volumes : there

is no mention of this in the paper though it was written after 1984 because it tells us the Khalsa Darbar Records moved then from Patiala to Amritsar. On the other hand those *BSNijjer*'s are the signatures of the archivist in 1965, the date in pencil in some notings on the insides of some covers, which Parminder Kaur told us are made by the binder once his job is done. Again, if you type into Google Search, say, "*barawurd Dhum Singh*" you'll get to a consortium of European archives which has, with laudable western diligence, carefully assigned to all the individual items in Kohli's catalogue their stated numbers in 2009—they also give the Chandigarh location of the Khalsa Darbar Records—little knowing that these numbers are now quasi obsolete. All this is a bit too much, so I'll now – August 7, 2014 – go back to mathematics, but I plan from time to time to venture out, and keep on adding more notes.

5.

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