



RESEARCH PAPER

Fall of Kalat State: British Occupation of Balochistan in 1839 A.D

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is to find out the reasons behind the decline of Kalat state after the death of Noori Naseer Khan and its eventual collapse in 1839, after British attacked and occupied it. The paper would emphasize on the internal conflicts for disintegration of the state due to which British could easily occupied it. The paper would also attempt to explain the real motives of British for attacking the Khanate. Normally, most of the authors believe that it was a punitive attack on Kalat. They argue that British attacked the Kalat for violation of treaties by Khan. However, this paper also tries to answer the question that, would British not attacked or occupied the Kalat, if the agreements between Khan and British had been done smoothly. The author is of the view that it was just a justification for attack. From day one British was clear about occupying Kalat. British had developed contact with Shah Nawaz much before this whole drama of negotiations and agreements. Thus, the paper exposes the design of British occupying forces of blaming others for its violent actions.

Keywords: Anglo-Afghan War, British Occupation, Kalat State, Shal

Background

The destiny of Balochistan changed drastically with the beginning of nineteenth century due to two reasons. First, the death of the greatest ruler of the Kalat state, Mir Naseer Khan Noori in the last decade of the eighteenth century started a period of chaos in Balochistan by the start of nineteenth century. (Dashti, 2012, p. 207) Second, the so called 'Great Game', the conflict between France, Russia and British over colonies, forced British to revisit its frontier policy. Balochistan lying at the frontier of British India came under its consideration. The French and Russian ambition toward Persia and Afghanistan alarmed British Indian policy makers. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Russians had occupied the Central Asian and, in fact, had started sending diplomatic missions to Iran, Afghanistan, Sindh and the Punjab. (Syed, 2007, p. 54) The British wanted to create a defense line for its most important colony, India. Due to the concerned about the Russian invasion of India, British intruded to the internal affairs of Afghanistan (Dashti, 2012, p. 219).

British Indian government sent Alexander Burnes, for this mission, to Afghanistan to negotiate with Dost Mohammad, the king of Afghanistan. Dost Mohammad agreed to negotiate with British only on one condition that British must accommodate its claim over Peshawar, which was at that time under Sikh ruler, Ranjit Singh. (Dashti, 2012, p. 223) According to Hameed Baloch, British did not want to offend the Sikh ruler, due which this negotiation ended in failure. (Baloch H. , 2012, p. 38) The failure of this negotiation led a tripartite agreement between the British India, Ranjit Singh and Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk (deposed ruler of Afghanistan). They decided to overthrow Dost Mohammed and place Shah Shuja on throne again. (Baloch H. , 2012, p. 40) In this situation the first Anglo-Afghan war was fought in 1839.

Most of the historians write that the importance of the Balochistan for British India developed during this war, as British army had to march through Bolan Pass to reach Afghanistan. Thus for this purpose, the negotiation between British India and Khan of Kalat Mir Mehrab Khan started in 1838. (Awan, 1985, p. 85) Though British forces passed through Balochistan during its campaign against Dost Mohammad, but the agreement between Khan and British officials did not went smoothly. British forces were plundered and harassed by Baloch tribes. Thus on his way back from Afghan campaign British undertook a retaliatory expedition to Kalat state, attacked the Kalat fort on 13th November 1839, assassinated Mir Mehrab Khan and occupied Balochistan. (Charls Masson, 1974, p. 183)

Kalat State at its Peak

The foundation of Baloch State was laid in 1666 AD by Mir Ahmad Yar Khan; however, Mir Naseer Khan by expanding its territory, consolidating it internally and thwarting major external threats to the state completed the process of state formation. (Naseer, 2007, p. 105) Mir Nasser Khan's era (1749-1794) known to be the golden period of Khanate of Kalat or Baloch confederacy in the history of Balochistan. During this period the Baloch state included areas of present day Pakistani Balochistan, most part of the Irani Balochistan and Baloch region of Afghanistan. According to Hameed Baloch the structure of Kalat State was based on old tribal setup of Balochistan with some improvements; such as, the general agreement of tribal chiefs to recognize the paramountcy of Khan. (Baloch H. , 2011, p. 66) However, before Mir Naseer Khan the Kalat State, though existing, was very loosely organized and remained at the mercy of neighboring big powers, such as Mughal, Persian and Afghan. (Dashti, 2012, p. 23) Due to the continuous interventions of these powers the level of sovereignty that Baloch state enjoyed did not remain constant throughout. It was Naseer Khan who emancipated the Baloch State from all external influences except a nominal allegiance to Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Abdali. (Qamar-ud-Din, 2017, p. 41) Mir Naseer Khan having leadership and administrative quality organized bureaucratic structure of the Kalat State according to the same patterns of surrounding countries and empire which made his reign stable. (Baloch H. , 2011, p. 67) Mir Naseer Khan's era is glorified as golden period in Baloch history by nationalist historian due to many reasons. Naseer Khan was the ablest Khan of Khanate history who expanded and consolidated the Baloch state to its peak. (Swidler, January 1972, p. 121) Soon after seizing the power and legitimizing his rule within his people, Naseer Khan started consolidating Baloch areas into Kalat state. When Afghan monarch became a hurdle in his expeditions, he rejected his authority and stopped paying tribute to Afghan monarch. (Qamar-ud-Din, 2017, p. 46) Afghan monarch fighting two wars with Naseer Khan couldn't subdue him under his rule. Thus, in 1758 a treaty of non-interferences was signed between two states. According to this treaty Baloch Khan was not bound to pay taxes to Afghan ruler. Baloch Khan was only treaty bound to help Afghan monarch during the time of war. As three years later we see the Baloch army fighting besides Ahmed Shah Abdali in third battle of Panipat. (Faridi, 1962, p. 202) Moreover, besides thwarting external influence over Khanate of Kalat, Naseer Khan also expanded the territory of state to a great extent. Lord Curzon, the British viceroy of India, defined the geography of Balochistan at the time of Mir Naseer Khan "the country between the Helmand and the Arabian Sea and between Kerman and Sind". (Awan, 1985, p. 24)

Mir Naseer Khan's ruled the Kalat for almost fifty years, which are remembered as the golden years in history of Balochistan. Naseer Khan formalized a fairly stable alliance with Afghan monarch, due to which he shifted his attention to consolidate southern borders of the state. During this period Makran, Lasbela and Kharan were conquered by Naseer Khan and Kalat reached to its maximum territorial expansion. (Breseeg, 2004, p. 134) According to Gul Khan, Noori Naseer Khan also increased the food production of the state by constructing small dams to irrigate the fertile lands of Kachhi permanently. These economic activities created surplus goods boosted trade and strengthened the country's economy.

However, what are the reasons that after some 45 years the Kalat state was occupied by British with a minimal resistance.

The Decline and Eventual fall of Kalat State

The internal dynamics of Kalat state after the death of Mir Naseer Khan will help to understand that why British captured Kalat fort so easily. After the death of Mir Naseer Khan in 1794, a civil war started at the center which weakened the state. There was a period of unending conflict between the Khan and tribal chiefs in the Khanate. (Pottinger, 2002, p. 23) Mir Naseer Khan was succeeded by his seven years old son, Mir Mahmood Khan who was not mature enough to run the affairs of the state. He was unable to take the all responsibilities of a big empire on his shoulder, so the Prime Minister, Akkond Fateh Muhammad, ran the administration. (Baluch, 1975, p. 71) Nevertheless, this offended the tribal chiefs that a non-Baloch prime minister is running all affairs of the state. This situation gave a chance to Mir Behram Khan (*Behram Khan was also from Ahmadzai clan. He was grandson of Mir Mohabat Khan who was a contender of throne at the time of Naseer Khan.*) to exploit the chiefs and claim for the throne. Thus a rebellion against new Khan began very soon.

This rebellion was harmful for Baloch state in two ways. First, to deal with this rebellion the Mahmud Khan sought the help of Afghan king. This again invited the foreign intervention in the internal affairs of the state. Secondly, this conflict destabilized the state which started disintegrating. Thus, Afghans occupied Derajat region which was a vassal province of Kalat, while in Makran and western Balochistan several chiefs declared their independence and refused to pay taxes to the center. (Kalayil, 1997, p. 69) On the other hand the Talpur Mirs of Sindh finding the situation ripe took control of Karachi and announced independence. The Khanate territory was shrinking day by day. When the British spies visited Balochistan in 1810, they easily noticed this chaotic situation of the Khanate of Kalat. (Pottinger, 2002, pp. 23-25)

The other reason for the disintegration of the Khanate was the conflict within the ruling family. The Khan was not interested in state affairs rather fulfilling his personal desires and fond of luxury. During this time Khan's brother, Mir Mustafa Khan, became the *de facto* ruler of the Kachhi. (Dashti, 2012, p. 197) The Khanate was divided between two brothers. Mir Mustafa Khan was growing very strong. According to Naseer Dashti, in order to remove the potential threat against his rule Mahmud Khan got Mir Mustafa Khan assassinated. (Dashti, 2012, p. 199) A conflict started within ruling family over this issue. After that Khan's half-brother Muhammad Rahim was killed because he was believed to be involved in assassination of Mustafa Khan. (Dashti, 2012, p. 201) These incidents contributed greatly in weakening the empire build by Naseer Khan.

The decline of economy was another contributor to the disintegration of the Khanate. The main sources of income which came from the tribes and their chiefs, war booty and trade stopped. The income from Makran, Kharan, Derajat and Karachi also stopped. (Redaelli, 1997, p. 35) In 19th century, the socio-political and economic dynamics of sub-continent, Central Asia and Persia changed. Punjab came under a powerful ruler Ranjit Singh, Iran became strong, while the Khanate and its military ally, Afghanistan, were in state of anarchy. A civil war in Afghanistan also ensued these days. The incompetent ruler of Afghanistan Shah Shuja was removed and Dost Mohammad occupied the throne. (Yapp, 1980, p. 58) In these oscillated events, the chiefs started occupying crown lands and tried to maintain their independent status.

In 1817, Mir Mahmood Khan died and his son, Mir Mehrab Khan succeeded him. (Redaelli, 1997, p. 38) Mir Mehrab Khan is blamed for behaving like a tyrannical ruler without considering the opinions of his subjects. Gul Khan Naseer remarked that though he was "thundering like a cloud, he rained like dewdrops". (Naseer, 2007, p. 133) Mirza Hakim Ali who was a contemporary of Mehrab Khan, made following statements:

“Mehrab Khan was a brave and wrathful person. The policy of an intelligent ruler is to conduct the administration with tact and statesmanship and oblige the people with kindness and benevolence. The government can never be set right by harshness. Mehrab Khan, on the other hand, started slaughtering men”. (Ahmed, 1968, p. 211)

He started a policy of isolating tribal chiefs. He was involved in various killings and murder of not only the members of Ahmadzai family but also of many tribal chiefs. He killed two important tribal Sardars; Sardar Qadir Bux Zarakzai the chief of Zehri tribe and Mir Ali Sher Bugti the chief of Bugti tribe. The aim of killing these tribal chiefs was to crush the matrimonial alliances of the chiefs and the Prime Minister. However, this policy of the Khan brought devastation for the Khanate. The Khan's inability to control the destructive activities of his subjects became the responsible for the downfall of his rule. (Dashti, 2012, p. 203)

Mehrab Khan, however, tried his level best to reunite Baloch territory back but his policies back fired. The Khanate never became strong to a position as it was during Naseer Khan. Thus, it was due to these reasons that when British attacked Kalat in November 1839, Mehrab Khan did not have enough support to resist British forces. (Ahmed, 1968, p. 213) British, therefore, easily occupied the Kalat by slaying the Khan. According to the report of Major General Willshir, total one hundred and thirty eight soldier including four captains, two lieutenants, one flag bearer and one adjutant died or got injuries from British side during this attack. On the other hand hundreds of Baloch soldier including Khan and some tribal chiefs and officials killed by British forces. (Naseer, 2007, p. 144)

British Motives of Attacking Kalat

British official records tried to maintain that Kalat was attacked as punishment because Mehrab Khan could not respect the agreement concluded between British and Kalat. Or it was the double game playing by Khan's *wazir* Mulla Mohammad Hassan which pursued British to attack Kalat. (Baloch H. , 2011, p. 65) However, the second part of this paper looking into the historical event tries to assess the British motives of attacking Kalat.

British contact with Kalat was initially established by British travelers in the late eighteenth century, who were sent by the British Indian Government to provide sufficient information about the existing economic and political structures of the areas beyond the river Indus. In 1809 when Captain Grant travelled through Makran to Persia, he gathered information primarily on the possibility of an invasion route from Persia to India. (Baloch D. F., 2018, p. 28) Most notable explorers sent out by John Malcolm were Christie and Henry Pottinger. They traveled together in disguise as Indian horse traders as far as Nushki, where Christie penetrated to Herat and thence reached Yezd and Isfahan. (Baloch D. F., 2018, p. 29) Henry Pottinger traversed the whole country of Balochistan, and passing through Kirman, rejoined Christie at Isfahan. Dr. Farooq Baloch argues that these spies were sent to Balochistan to pave the way for future British intervention in Balochistan. British had already planned to control Balochistan for its strategic importance. (Swidler, January 1972, p. 28) It was the strategic importance of Balochistan that these British officials risked their lives to explore Balochistan. (Swidler, January 1972, p. 29)

The fear of Russian invasion of India forced British to directly intervene in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. Lord Auckland sent Alexander Burnes to Afghanistan to negotiate with Afghan ruler. The negotiation between Alexander Burnes and Dost Mohammad failed. After the failure of Burnes mission in the early summer of 1838, an agreement was concluded between the British Indian Government, Runjeet Singh, and Shah Shujah. (*Shah Shujah was in exiled in India at that time and was constantly finding an opportunity to re-occupy the Afghan throne, which was snatched from him by Dost ad.Mohamm*) The agreement concluded that:

“Shah with a force officered from an Indian army, and paid by British money, possessing also the goodwill and support of the Runjeet Singh, should attempt the recovery of his throne.” (Burnes, 1973, p. 114)

In order to attack Kabul British forces had to pass through Balochistan. Burnes, therefore, proceeded to Kalat to engage in a negotiation with Baloch Khan. (Burnes, 1973, p. 138) He was courteously received by Khan of Kalat. He found Mehrab Khan an able and sagacious man. (Burnes, 1973, p. 139) Burnes had brought with him the draft of a treaty, in which he made it a condition that Khan should meet with Shah in his camp. Mehrab Khan disliked and resisted that condition. The treaty, by which the supremacy of Shah was acknowledged, bound the British Government to pay Khan of Kalat a lakh and a half of rupees annually, in return for which the Khan promised to “use his best endeavours to procure supplies, carriage, and guards to protect provisions and stores going and coming from Shikarpoor, by the route of Rozan, Dadur, the Pass of Bolan, through Shal to Koochlak, from one frontier to another.” (Burnes, 1973, p. 141)

The Khan had tense relations with the Sardars, especially those of Sarawan, which was on the route of British forces. However, Mehrab Khan Agreement was not honored by the tribes who harassed and plundered the British Army. Baloch raiders stole whole string of camels, water courses were blocked, some wells deliberately polluted when the troops passed through Bolan Pass. (Dashti, 2012, p. 206) The British assumed the violation of treaty on Mehrab’s part. At once the British held the Khan responsible behind this story.

Mehrab Khan was unaware of a conspiracy being devised in his court by his Wazir, Mullah Mohammad Khan. Mullah Mohammad Khan’s father was killed by Mehrab Khan in 1833, waiting for appropriate time for vengeance, soon he got that opportunity. Mullah Mohammad Khan advised Mehrab Khan that the British were out to ruin him, which was not difficult to believe as Kalat’s resources were being depleted. At the same time, the Wazir represented to Macnaghten and Burnes that Mir Mehrab Khan had no intentions of keeping his treaty obligations. In fact, the Wazir, in possession of the Khan’s seal, fabricated letters so that they looked as though they had been written by the Khan ordering his naibs to attack British troops. The conspirator Mullah was also responsible for attacking Burnes’s mission and stealing the treaty. Mehrab Khan received advice from his Wazir that the British would arrest the Khan upon visiting Shah. Fearing hostilities, Mehrab Khan remained aloof, and the British decided to deal with the Khan at a later time as they marched on to conquer Afghanistan. (Baloch H. , 2012, pp. 29-30)

After a successful occupation of Afghanistan and installing English puppet Shah Shujah as King, British Army was eager for same solution for Kalat. On the morning of November 13, a British-Indian force appeared before Kalat, and stormed it—news which was received with delight. General Macnaghten heard it when dining with general Avitabile, Commandant of Peshawar. (Baloch H. , 2012, p. 42)

On December 3 one of the British officials wrote to a higher official that “It turned out to be an express with another little battle, and a most successful one. The Khan of Khelat was by way of being our ally and assistant and professing friendship: did himself the pleasure of cutting off the supplies of the army when it was on its way to Cabul; set his followers on to rob the camp; corresponded with Dost Mahomed, &c. There was no time to fight with him then...It was all done in the Ghuznee manner—the gates blown in and the fort stormed—but the fighting was very severe. The Khan and his principal chiefs died sword in hand, which was rather too fine a death for such double traitor; and one in six of our troops were either killed or wounded, which is an unusual proportion...Also there will be a great deal of prize money.” (Baloch H. , 2011, p. 112)

It was no doubt the British strategy to justify its military expansions. In reality British had already decided to attack Kalat since Mehrab Khan, like Dost Mohammad was not negotiable on completely British terms. The British officials in ground were not happy

with Mehrab Khan. Lt. Leech, the agent at Shikarpur, interpreted the shortage of supplies and unfriendliness of the people in Kalat as an indication of Mehrab Khan's hostility when he reported to Burnes the following:

“...these rude brahuis of the hills have got the idea that Russia is our rival in India, although they do not know what portion of the globe that nation is...In the case of his [Mehrab Khan] refusing to send a representative to the Court of Shah Shoojah or to commence furnishing supplies for the Army. A communication should be opened with Shah Nawaz, with whom I have had several secret interviews while in Candahar.” (Baloch H. , 2011, p. 78)

British wanted to negotiate with Mehrab Khan on her fullest terms or replace Mehrab him like Dost Mohammad. Lieutenant Robert Leech had already alienated and disenchanted Mehrab Khan in his first meeting which happened when Leech was on his way back to India after the failure of his mission in Afghanistan. (Heathcote, 2015, pp. 36-37) He also had secret contacts with Shah Nawaz and plotted to remove Khan before the above misconduct have happened which were used as justification for attacking Kalat.

Conclusion

Naseer Khan I consolidated Baloch land in a single entity and gave it an independent status among neighboring empires. Under his ruler ship Kalat state expanded and prospered. However after Naseer Khan I internal feuds in ruling family weakened the center and Kalat state started disintegrating. It also brought external interventions into Kalat affairs from Naseer Khan I freed it and made it a sovereign. Meanwhile, British interest grew in the region due to the commencement of so-called great game. British wanted puppet government both in Afghanistan and Balochistan to negotiate with them with his full terms. Mehrab Khan was not easy to negotiate completely on British terms. So British had decided to replace him before all this drama of arbitration. Many sources claim that British after storming Kalat found out that Mehrab Khan was innocent and he was Mulla Mohammad who plotted against him. Yet the British denied the throne to his son, and appointed Shah Nawaz as the next Khan in 1840. It was because British had already decided to install Shah Nawaz. Shah Nawaz accepted the supremacy of British like Shah Shuja and the British smoothly merged the rich and fertile provinces of Shal, Mastung and Kachhi to Afghanistan to fulfill its strategic interests in the region.

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