



Response of the Indians to the First World War with Special Reference to the Sikh Rulers of the Punjab

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Abstract:

The people of India expressed their immediate support to the British during the First World War. The political parties of India quickly provided their support to the British in the First World War. They addressed people in different parts of the country and encouraged them to provide every kind of help to the British in this War. The people of different religions also supported the British cause. The Ghadar party tried to inspire people to revolt against the British but couldn't get popular support.

Keywords: Imperial Council, Ghadar, Princely States, Imperial Service Troops, maharaja

Objectives:

1. To analyse the response of the Indian leaders to the First World War
2. To know the reaction of the press to the First World War.
- 3 To analyse the role played by various religious communities at the commencement of the war.
- 4 To know the response of various princely states to the involvement of India in the War

The First World War began on July 30, 1914 when Austria-Hungary declared War on Serbia. The British joined this War on August 4, 1914 and the War ended on November 11, 1918. India being a colony of the British Empire joined the War almost immediately. As soon as Great Britain declared War against Germany many educated Indians who represented all shades of political opinion i.e. Pro-British, Moderates, Extremists and even anti-British assembled at the West End Club in London and openly expressed their support in favour of the British Government and strongly believed that the princes and the people of India would place all their resources, their armies and even their own lives in support of the British in this War. Soon an address with a large number of signatures was sent to the Secretary of State for India for submission to His Majesty in which the Indians had assured their cooperation to the British in this War.¹ Sir Pherozeshah Mehta addressed the people in Bombay in which he urged the people to forget all their differences of caste and religion and provide their individual services and national resources to help the British in this War and the Indians should prove themselves as loyal and devoted subjects of the British Crown. A resolution was proposed by Sir Jamesjee Jeejeebhoy which was seconded by Sir Ibrahim Rahimtoola, C.I.E. and supported by Sir Bhal Chandra Krishna, Mr. Marshall Reid, C.I.E. and Dr. D.A. d'Moate and in this resolution the feeling of unswerving loyalty and devotion to the British Crown by the citizens of Bombay was expressed. An extraordinary meeting of the Bengal Legislative Council was held to express the loyalty to the Crown in that time of emergency and hearty cooperation was assured to the

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¹ Sir Mancherjee Bhownagree, 'The Verdict of India', *The War League Journal*, Vol. II, April 1916, p. 110. Available at Punjab State Archives Patiala hereafter given as a PSA.



Government. Surender Nath Banerjee supported this resolution and expressed that the whole of India had emanated a striking testimony of devotion to the Empire and was ready to support the British Government in every possible way. Similar sentiments were expressed by the representatives of the people, with all the earnest sincerity of a deep conviction at all other Provincial Councils as well as the Imperial Council.² Dadabhai Naroji, Bhupinder Nath Basu, a representative of the Bengal leaders and Mr. P.M. Mehta of Bombay also expressed similar sentiments.³ With the beginning of the War, the Indian National Congress at once supported the British Government. Mahatma Gandhi also demonstrated absolute loyalty to the British as he believed that India's help at this critical time would certainly benefit the Indians in the long run. He gave precedence to England's need over that of India and did not prefer to use the War as an opportunity for the Indians to get their demands accepted by the Government.⁴ He also offered his services to help the wounded people when he was in London but could not implement it due to his poor health. When he reached India he again offered to help the injured people and also proposed to raise a corps of stretcher bearers and hospital assistants to serve those who had been wounded in the Mesopotamia campaign but his offer was declined.⁵ The twenty-ninth session of the Indian National Congress was held at Madras in 1914 A.D. This session was presided over by Sir Bhupendra Nath Basu. In his Presidential address he remarked that the Indians had join this War as it was being waged for liberty and justice. Although the role of the Congress was that of an opposition party yet due to the crisis of the War the Congress would not oppose the Government. They must help the British in that critical moment and all other domestic affairs could be sorted out later. In this session, the Congress passed a resolution in which it declared loyalty towards the Empire and also promised to give every type of support to the British. The resolution also demanded that the Indians should be allowed to join the higher ranks of the Army.⁶ The thirtieth session of the Congress was held in 1915 A.D. at Bombay. Sir Satyendra Prasad Sinha was the President who reaffirmed the support of the Congress to the British Government and declared that their support was selfless and was not out of any expectation of reforms as the award for the loyalty of the Congress. Sir Michael O'Dwyer, the Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab attended a meeting of the Punjab Legislative Council on September 19, 1914 and declared that following their tradition, the Punjab would help in every possible manner in this War. The people of Punjab obliged the

² Khosla brothers (Compl.), *India and the War*, Revised Edition, Lahore, 1924, pp. 33-34.

³ Sir Mancherjee Bhownagree, *op.cit.*, pp. 119-120. PSA.

⁴ Sunil Jain, 'The Congress Movement in the Punjab During the First World War', *Punjab History Conference Proceedings*, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1987, p. 370.

⁵ Satyapal and Prabodh Chandra, *Sixty Years of Congress*, Lahore, 1946, p. 118.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 198-200.



Lieutenant-Governor and rendered useful services during the War.⁷ The Gurudwara Committee of Baba Bakala held 'Path' in the Gurudwara to pray for the British victory in this War.⁸

The Punjab Congress adopted a very sympathetic attitude towards the British. Fazal-i-Hussain also gave his wholehearted support to the War efforts of the British Government. But Lala Lajpat Rai wanted that the British Government should abandon their policy of racial discrimination against Indians and was not in favour of helping the Government. The people of Lahore at once announced their full fledged support to the cause of the Great Britain. With the British entering the World War, the people of Lahore jointly convened a meeting in Town Hall Ground on August 8, 1914 A.D. This meeting was attended by people belonging to different religions i.e. Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Parsis. They jointly prayed for the British success in this War and also pledged to make every kind of sacrifice for the British Government.⁹ The Punjab Province was very important for the British Government as it was regarded as the 'Sword of India'. After the annexation of the Punjab in the British Empire, the brave and martial people of the Punjab had also rendered valuable military services to the British Government. So the various army officers from Lord Roberts to Lord Kitchener depended heavily on Punjab for manpower. When the First World War broke out the British Government expected Punjabis to provide large scale recruitments for the army and the Punjabis obliged the Government. So the main policy of Michael O'Dwyer, the Lieutenant-Governor, was to remove any type of hindrance in the path of recruitment in the army and for this the suppression of the revolutionary movements was the top priority of the Government.¹⁰ The outbreak of the First World War infused a new life into the nationalist movement which had been suspended after the Swadeshi Movement. The War threw open an opportunity for the Ghadar revolutionaries who attempted a violent overthrow of the British Government in India.

The main aim of the Ghadrates was to strike a militant revolution in Punjab and overthrow the British Raj. Their weekly paper 'The Ghadar' became very popular not only in North America but also in Philippines, Hong Kong, China, the Malaya States, Singapore, India. This weekly played a major role in infusing revolutionary spirit among the Punjabi immigrants and inspired them to revolt rather than showing loyalty towards the British.¹¹ In 1914 A.D. three events greatly effected the course of this movement. These were the arrest and escape of Lala Hardyal, the Komagata Maru incident and the First World War. The First World War made the Ghadar revolution impending. The leaders of the movement decided to take full advantage of the War and wage armed rebellion. So

⁷ M.S. Leigh, *The Punjab and the War*, Lahore, 1922, pp. 29-30.

⁸ The Khalsa Advocate, Amritsar, Saturday, October 15, 1914, p. 5. PSA.

⁹ Sunil Jain, *op.cit.*, pp. 370-371.

¹⁰ Michael O'Dwyer, *India As I Knew It (1885-1925)*, III Edition, London, 1926, pp. 213-214.

¹¹ Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, K.N. Pannikar and Sucheta Mahajan, *Indian's Struggle for Independence, 1845-1947*, New Delhi, 2001, pp. 146-151.

‘Ailan-e-Jang’ or proclamation of War was circulated widely. After reaching Punjab their immediate aim was to collect funds and arrange for the arms and ammunition and it was decided to raid police stations and treasuries. In November and December months of 1914 A.D. many dacoities were made. They wanted to rob Moga treasury in October but could not succeed due to the opposition of the villagers. A futile attempt was made on Sarhali Police Station.¹² The leaders of the movement soon realized that the people of the Punjab would not support their revolutionary activities. Even the Chief Khalsa Diwan had openly supported the War efforts of the British Government and had also considered Ghadrities as criminals. They openly asked people to help the Government to arrest them. The Ghadrities also tried to inspire revolution among the army men but all in vain. Finally Rash Behari Bose, the Bengali revolutionary arrived in Punjab in January 1915 A.D. and planned to carry out a rebellion on February 19. However this plan was ruined and the British succeeded in arresting a large number of the leaders. Forty-five were sentenced to death and two hundred were imprisoned for life. So the movement could not achieve its goal as during the whole period of the War, the Punjabis remained loyal to the British. Even Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai were not in favour of revolutionary activity in Punjab.¹³

The Press also played a dominant role in moulding the public opinion in the favour of the British Government. The only English-edited journal in the Punjab was ‘the Civil and Military Gazette’ which was published from Lahore. It showed its loyalty and support to the Government during the whole War period. The vernacular newspapers also showed constraint.¹⁴ The Punjab also published a newspaper for the army men, the ‘Fauji Akhbar’ in which stories of the War, service opportunities and recruitment procedures were published. Another premier War journal was ‘Haq’ which was published in Urdu, Hindi, Gurmukhi and English. This paper was a big source of propaganda for the British. ‘Phool’ a regional magazine for children was also widely circulated for children that contained news about war, examination and education.¹⁵ All these newspapers helped in arousing a spirit of loyalty and devotion towards the British in their just War against the evil forces.

When Turkey joined War against England, ‘jihad’, the War cry had become the major strategy of Germans and Turks. It was believed that this could create a tension among the Muslims of India who would certainly join their Muslim brothers of Turkey. Except for a few incidents of rebellion, the Indian Muslims remained mostly loyal as they thought that the War was an opportunity

¹² M.S. Leigh, *op.cit.*, pp. 19-20.

¹³ A.C. Bose, ‘Indian Revolutionaries during the First World War’, D.C. Ellinwood and S.D. Pradhan (ed.), *India and World War I*, New Delhi, 1978, p. 112.

¹⁴ M.S. Leigh, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁵ N. Gerald Barrier, ‘Ruling India: Coercion and Propaganda in British India during the First World War’, D.C. Ellinwood and S.D. Pradhan (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp. 89, 99.

to show their loyalty towards the British.¹⁶ Munshi Kifayat Ali Khan, the Chief Revenue Officer of the Faridkot State delivered a speech in the meeting of Muslims which was held on November 15, 1914 A.D. In his speech he inspired all the Muslims of India to help the British in every possible way¹⁷ and the British appreciated the loyal sentiments expressed by the Muslims in regard to the war with Turkey.¹⁸ Throughout the War period the Sikhs of the Princely States of the Punjab provided their help to the British Government. In August 1917 A.D. The Sikhs of Patiala and Nabha State assembled in their State capitals in large numbers and expressed their loyalty to the British in this War.¹⁹ The Sikh rulers of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Kapurthala, Faridkot and Kalsia were already under the protection of the British since 1809 A.D. Many Sanads were granted upon them which made it mandatory for them to help the British in time of emergency. Imperial Service Troops were already formed in 1888 A.D. in order to improve the efficiency of the State troops and to bring them at par with the Imperial forces so as to employ them whenever the British Government wanted. With the outbreak of the First World War, the King-Emperor of Great Britain sent a message to the Princes and people of India. This message was read out by the Superintendent of the Faridkot State in the Darbar which was held on the occasion of Dussehra festival at Faridkot in 1914 A.D. In this message the King-Emperor had expressed his utmost satisfaction at the passionate devotion shown by the Indian people and the ruling Chiefs of India. In response to this message, the Faridkot ruler had again assured his support for the noble and righteous cause of the British Government.²⁰ The same feeling of loyalty and devotion was immediately expressed by the rulers of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Kapurthala and Kalsia.

England and France relied extensively on their colonies for the supply of men and material in the First World War. The British had decided to send the Indian troops in Europe as early as August 4, 1914 when a meeting of the War Council was held at 10 Downing Street in London.²¹ Although the Indian soldiers had been employed beyond the Indian frontiers before 1914 A.D. yet they were used for non-combatant duties only. The main duty of the Indian Army was to maintain law and order in India and to safeguard the frontiers of India. But the First World War brought a change in their policy and the British decided to employ the Indian troops to all the War fronts.²² Along with the Indian Army, the troops of the Princely States of India also played a very conspicuous role in the various

¹⁶ Vedica Kant, *India and the First World War: If I die here, who will remember me?*, New Delhi, 2014, pp. 196-197.

¹⁷ Faridkot State Records, Head:- Military, Basta No. 8, File No. 279, pp. 3-11. PSA.

¹⁸ Faridkot State Records, Head:- Military, Basta No. 26, File No. 985, letter No. 529-C from Major A.C. Elliott, Political Agent, Bahawalpur Agency to the Superintendent, Faridkot State, dated December 6, 1914 A.D., p. 17. PSA.

¹⁹ Foreign and Political Department, Internal-B, September 1917, Nos. 105-106, pp. 5-6. National Archives of India, New Delhi hereafter given as NAI.

²⁰ *Report on the Administration of Faridkot State for the year 1914-15 A.D.*, Lahore, 1915, pp. 5-6. PSA.

²¹ Santanu Das, *Indian Troops in Europe 1914-1918*, Ahmedabad, 2015, p. 13.

²² D.C. Ellinwood and S.D. Pradhan (ed.), *India and World War I*, New Delhi, 1978, p. 5.

War theatres. The British had been successful in binding the Chiefs of the Princely States of India to them and these Chiefs who then ruled about one-third of India in partnership with the British regarded themselves as an integral part of the British Empire. Following the tradition of loyalty towards the British Government the Sikh rulers of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Kapurthala and Faridkot also employed their troops in the different battle fields of the War. The Maharaja of Patiala, attended the War Conference which was held at Delhi from April 27 to 29, 1918 and emphasized the fact that their efforts during the War were spontaneous and were born of their deep-rooted sense of loyalty and duty towards the British.²³

The number of the Indian troops that were employed in different War fronts till October 31, 1918 was as: (a) France- 132, 496, (b) East Africa – 46,906, (c) Mesopotamia – 588,717, (d) Egypt – 116, 159, (e) Gallipoli and Salonika – 9,366, (f) Aden and Persian Gulf – 49,700. So total 943, 344 troops of India were employed.²⁴ The Imperial Service Troops of the Princely States of India also actively participated in many of these fronts. At the beginning of 1917 A.D. there were 24,000 Imperial Service Troops of which not less than one-third belonged to the Punjab. The Indian troops also won appreciation of their commanding officers and the British Government. The commanding officers considered that if only bravery and self-sacrifice of the Indians were to be taken into account than they could take place in any rank but they lacked training.²⁵ The Indian soldiers had no opportunity for the higher training which was required for European Warfare. They were thousands of miles away from home and in a strange land among strange people whose language and customs they did not understand. The Indian troops had to face adverse climatic conditions. Not only this the industrial revolution had modernized warfare through discoveries like the combustion engine which were not known to the Indians.²⁶ The soldiers even started making desperate pleas back home that the Indians should not go to this War in Europe.²⁷ Fighting against all odds, the Indian troops set up an example of dedication and devotion towards the duty. The Imperial Service Troops of the Sikh rulers served in the various War theatres and won laurels by the gallant and noble way in which they acquitted themselves in the First World War. The Imperial Service Troops of the Sikh rulers had shown exemplary bravery in this War. The Sikh ruler of Patiala provided infantry and cavalry regiments whereas Nabha, Jind and Kapurthala had provided infantry regiments to the British Government. The ruler of Faridkot State sent his contingent of Sappers and Miners which was responsible for the engineering work and its main function was to construct roads, repair railway

²³ *Jind State Records, Head:- First Anglo-German War, Basta No. 29, File No. 2330, p. 2. PSA.*

²⁴ Dewitt C. Ellinwood, *The Indian Soldier, The Indian Army and Change 1914-1918*, D.C. Ellinwood and S. D. Pradhan (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 183.

²⁵ General Sir James Willcocks, *With the Indians in France*, London, 1920, pp. 5-6.

²⁶ Rana T.S. Chhina, *The Indian Army*, New Delhi, 2007, p. 115.

²⁷ Santanu Das, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

engines and lines, to make floating bridges on rivers and canals etc.²⁸ The soldiers from Punjab fought at different War fronts as:- France, Gallipoli, Salonika, Egypt, Somaliland, East and West Africa, Aden, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, the Caucasus, China and the North-West and the North-East Frontiers of India.²⁹ The services of the Rajindar Lancers of the Patiala State were utilized in Egypt and Mesopotamia and the Patiala Imperial Service Infantry served in Egypt, Gallipoli and Palestine.³⁰ The Imperial Service Troops of Nabha and Jind served in Mesopotamia³¹ and East Africa³² respectively. The services of the Kapurthala Imperial Service Troops and the Faridkot Sappers and Miners were utilized in East Africa.³³ The Imperial Service Troops of these States won honours for their States and earned gratitude of the Paramount Power for the bravery and loyalty shown in the battle field.³⁴

These Sikh rulers provided help to the British in the form of men, money and material in the First World War. The contribution of the Patiala State to the Indian Army was 25,000 men i.e. 1 in 30 of the total male population.³⁵ The total expenditure spent on its fighting force was Rs. 60 lacs. The State also furnished 1000 camels, 250 mules and 400 horses for the transport and Remount branches. The total contribution of the Patiala State was Rs. 1,35,20,043-15-1.³⁶ The ruler of the Nabha State provided 1086 combatants in the ranks of the Indian Army. About seven thousand men of the State served in the War and five thousand³⁷ were enlisted during the War period including 4,820 in the Indian Army in which the former figure represented 16.4 percent of the eligible males of the State.³⁸ The total cash contribution made by the State was Rs 9,93,991. The total contribution of the Jind State to the Indian Army was 6,885 and to Imperial Service Troops was 1788. So total contribution of the man power was 8673 and the total War expenditure was above Rs. 32,62,241³⁹ or Rs. 32,99,207.⁴⁰ But M.S. Leigh writes that the Jind State spent over Rs. 24 lakhs in form of material and animals and Rs.

²⁸ Dewitt C. Ellinwood and S.D. Pradhan (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 51.

²⁹ M.S. Leigh, *The Punjab and the War*, Lahore, 1922, p. 198.

³⁰ *Patiala State Records, Head:- History (Maharaja Bhupinder Singh), Basta No. 3, File No. H-108B*, p. 43. PSA.

³¹ *Annual Report on the Native States under the Control of the Punjab Government for the year 1918-19*, p. 8. PSA.

³² Punjab States Agency, Basta No. 6200, p. 79. Punjab State Archives (Chandigarh Branch)

³³ Kapurthala State Records, Head:- War, Basta No. 57, File No. W/1-13-18, p. 7. PSA., also see Faridkot State Records, Head:- Military, Basta No. 31, File No. 1195. PSA.

³⁴ *Report on the Administration of the Punjab and Its Dependencies for 1916-17*, Lahore, 1918, p. ii. Haryana State Archives, Panchkula.

³⁵ Patiala State Records, Head: History (Maharaja Bhupinder Singh), Basta No. 1, File No. H-21B, p. 18. PSA.

³⁶ Patiala State Records, Head: Ijlas-i-Khas, Basta No. 7, File No. 103, p. 159. PSA.

³⁷ Khosla Brothers (Compl.), *op.cit.*, p. 270B.

³⁸ M.S. Leigh, *op.cit.*, p. 89.

³⁹ Jind State Records, Head: First Anglo-German War, Basta No. 28, File No. 2271, pp. 11, 25. PSA. also see Jind State Records, Head: First Anglo-German War, Basta No. 30, File No. 2352, p. 1. PSA.

⁴⁰ *Annual Report on the Native States under the Control of the Punjab Government for the year 1918-19 A.D.*, Simla, 1919, p. 7. PSA.



11,50,000 were invested in loan and conversion. So the total War expenditure of the Jind State was Rs. 3,550,000.⁴¹ The total contribution of the Kapurthala State in the First World War was roughly to 5,900 men, gifts in cash and kind to the value of nearly 11,50,000 of rupees and loans to the value of Rs. 14 lakhs.. The total number of Faridkot men who served during the War was 2759 or more than 12 percent of the eligible males of the State. The cash contribution made by the State was Rupees 5,69,332.⁴² During the First World War, Kalsia State provided 1014 men as recruits. The number represented more than ten percent of the eligible males. The cash contribution made by the State was Rs. 1,38,202.⁴³ The State invested Rs. 3,62,701 in War Loans and also presented ten horses⁴⁴ worth Rs. 5,000 for War purposes. Finances were shared by the Darbar as well as the public. Rs. 1,66,900 were invested by the Darbar, Rs. 20,100 by the Rani Sahiba and the remainder by the public.⁴⁵

With the beginning of the War, the Sikh rulers not only placed their forces at the disposal of the British Government but also offered their personal services to the British. This War opened a new and magnificent chapter in the history of Patiala State. It was a brilliant record of personal example which the Maharaja himself set for the people. Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala hastened to offer all that the Patiala State possessed in the cause of the King Emperor and claimed the privilege of leading in person his gallant troops. He himself visited Belgium, Italy and Palestine.⁴⁶ Before bidding goodbye to his troops, he exhorted them to fight with sincerity and bravely the battles of the British in any theatre of War to which they might be sent after him. He left Patiala for the European Front on October 5, 1914. Unfortunately on his arrival at Aden, he was found to be very ill from nephrit and was invalided home from there.⁴⁷ Sardar H.S. Malik, who was appointed as the Prime Minister of the Patiala State in 1944 A.D. also proceeded to France during the First World War and served at first with the French Army on the Western Front and then in 1917-1918 A.D. as a fighting pilot in the Royal Flying Corps and then in Royal Air Force in France and Italy.⁴⁸ Jagatjit Singh, the Maharaja of

⁴¹ M.S. Leigh, *op.cit.*, p. 89.

⁴² Faridkot State Records, Head: Military, Basta No. 25, File No. 934, pp. 80-81. PSA.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴⁴ *Foreign and Political Department, Internal-B, March 1916, Nos. 115*, p. 1. National Archives of India hereafter given as NAI also see *Kalsia State Records, Head: The Great War, Basta No. 52, File No. W3*, pp. 11, 15. PSA.

⁴⁵ M.S. Leigh, *op.cit.*, p. 99.

⁴⁶ *The Times of India*, New Delhi, June 13, 1932, p. 5.

⁴⁷ *Foreign and Political Department, Secret – Internal, October 1916, Nos. 35-36*, p. 3. NAI also see *Patiala State Records, Head:- Ijlas-i-Khas, Basta No. 120, File No. 1556*, pp. 4-5. PSA.

⁴⁸ A. Freelance, *Current Affairs, The Patiala Post*, April-May 1944, p. 1. PSA.



Kapurthala also visited the battlefield in France in 1915 A.D.. His son Captain Maharaja Kumar Amarjit Singh served with the 3rd Lahore Division for more than a year.⁴⁹

Conclusion:

Hence the Indian leaders, people and the ruling Chiefs openly supported the British in the First World War. They provided wholehearted financial and military aid to the British and made efforts to prove themselves as the loyal subjects of the British. The Ghadar Party could not infuse revolutionary feelings among the people of the Punjab. The First World War provided golden opportunity to the Sikh rulers to prove their loyalty. They immediately declared their unconditional support to the British Government. These Sikh rulers and their subjects extended persistent assistance in the form of men, livestock, material and finances throughout the War and proved themselves to be an indispensable asset to the British Government.

⁴⁹ Kapurthala State Records, Head :- War, Basta No. 67, File No. W/1-4-19, p.20, PSA. PSA also see Khan Bahadur Mian Abdul Hamid, *Report on the Administration of the Kapurthala State for the year 1915-16 A.D.*, Lahore, 1916, p.8, PSA also see *Kapurthala State*, Bombay, 1927, p.6.