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## **Ambala`s Response to 1857**

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### **Abstract**

A treaty signed by Marathas and Britishers in 1803 (Sirijianjan gaon) led to the annexation of Haryana to British rule. 1 So far as Ambala was concerned, even the Sikh jagirdars of Ambala came under the Britishers in 1809. They accepted all the conditions imposed upon them. Ambalas Chief Daya Kaur died in 1823, and the estate came under British control; the town became the residence of the political agent of cis-Sutlej states. The Britishers set up their cantonment in 1806 in Karnal to strengthen their position in this region (Haryana). 4 But between 1841-43, they decided to shift their cantonment from Karnal to Ambala. For this purpose, they acquired about ten thousand acres of land in the surrounding villages of Ambala. They followed all the parameters of a modern city while establishing the cantonment under the supervision of Robert Napier, a distinguished civil engineer and military officer in the British army. The acquired land was divided into blocks and sub-blocks; considering the need of the army, a network of roads was laid across this area. The first question is why Ambala was selected for the cantonment by the Britishers. Several arguments can be advanced in this regard. Their first consideration was that by occupying Ambala, they could keep a watch over the might and activities and the Sikh power in Punjab. And in due course of time, Punjab and its neighbouring areas could be conquered by making Ambala its base for military action. Secondly, Ambala falls between the Ghaghra, the Tangri, the Markanda rivers, and the Yamuna flow in the east and Sutlej in the west. Hence, Ambala was important from the strategic point of view, and drinking water in abundant quantity could be made available to the huge size of the Army. Thirdly, Ambala is a foothill of Shivalik Hills. This district comprises mountains, forests, and plain areas, indicating a salubrious climate. Lately, Karnal fell in the grip of horrible malaria and cholera, which resulted in the fatalities of about five hundred to seven hundred English people. That is why British rulers wanted to shift the Cantonment from Karnal to Ambala.

### **Events**

26 March 1857: Depot Musketry (late 28 th Regiment Native Infantry lines )- Attempt to fire the house of Soobedar Hurbuns Singh, 36th Regiment Native Infantry, attached to Musketry Depot.

13 April 1857: Depot Musketry - Europeans's chuppur burnt

15 April 1857: 60th Regiment Native Infantry Lines Riding-Master Boucher's out-houses set on fire



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16 April 1857: Hospital (late 28th Regiment Native Infantry) in which the Europeans's Musketry Depot was located, but empty when fired.

16 April 1857: No. 9, European Infantry Barrack in which 442 casks of beer were fired for European soldiers.

17 April 1857: 50 Regiment Native Infantry Lines Lieutenant Whiting's bungalow fired; attempt to fire Lieutenant Walker's stables, 60th Regiment Native Infantry.

19 April 1857: 60th Regiment Native Infantry Lines House occupied by Lieutenant Graigie, 36th Regiment Ross, 9th Regiment, Cornfield, 3rd Regiment, Officers attached to the Musketry Depot, stable burnt; Fired also the house of Sheo Narain Singh, Subedar, 3rd Company, 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment Native Infantry Lines, and a Civil Police chownki on the Grand Trunk Road.

20 April 1857: Attempt to fire the houses of the jamadar and Havaladar, 5th Regiment Native Infantry Lines, both attached to Musketry Depot.

21 April 1857: Six or seven houses, 6th Company, 60th Regiment Native Infantry fired, in which the property of sepoy was preceded on furlough.

22 April 1857: 5th Regiment Native Infantry Mess Compound, Sheep house set on fire; European Infantry Lines- Major Laughton's stables attempted to be fired.

23 April 1857: 9th Lancers Lines- attempt to fire Captain John William Sounder's house, 41st Regiment Native Infantry, attached to the Musketry Depot.

25 April 1857: 9th Lancers Lines - Band Master's house. Her Majesty's 9th Lancers, Regimental property burnt.

26 April 1857: Attempt (during the day) to fire Lieutenant and Riding-master Shaw's house, 9th Lancers Lines.

1 May 1857: Baijnath sepoy's hut (5th Regiment Native Infantry Lines) attached to the Musketry depot was burnt.

The British officers were stunned /confounded to see the above-mentioned rising incidents of arson. A Court of Inquiry was constituted to detect the culprits, but no solution could be arrived at. The D.C. Ambala and military officers were fully engaged in this mission, and a bounty of rupees one thousand was announced to be given to the person who would supply information in this regard, but no positive outcome happened. Capt. Howard remarks that one or two persons could not have done this work. There could be tacit consent of the entire regiment behind such activities if soldiers from the other corps could be involved in it. That was why no one came forward to provide any information. 45 Commander-in-Chief Anson had apprised Sir John Lawrence, Chief Commissioner of Punjab, of the development in Ambala Cantonment.

Fortunately, the English happened to have a very strong clue about the arsonists. A soldier named Sham Singh from the native infantry told T.D. Forsyth, Collector and the Magistrate that the deployment of new cartridges and the pressure being built by the Govt. to use them had triggered



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great unrest and anger among the Indian soldiers. They had decided if they were pressurized for using these cartridges, they would vandalize all public property. Under this conspiracy, they had a mind to capture the native regiment magazine, the soldiers of light cavalry would seize the guns and cannons the reins of horses of 9th lancers would be untied, they would be let loose by snapping their reins and killing of the Britishers would be initiated. Twala Nath, Kotwal of Sadar Bazar, also confirmed this conspiracy. Local military officers and the commander-in-chief, who was on a trip to some hilly station, were also informed about the above-mentioned conspiracy or development. Commander-in-chief ordered the officers stationed at Ambala to remain vigilant and watchful and take all possible precautionary measures to avoid any mishap/untoward incident. Military patrolling was intensified, and safety measures were deployed in a big way at every important/strategic point. This Strategy was executed so earnestly that the English soldiers would hardly sleep one/two nights a week. Even then, no breakthrough happened. British officers admitted openly that they were at a loss to understand what was happening at Ambala Cantonment. Commander-in-chief wrote to Governor General of India Lord Charles Canning immediately that the arsonists were not likely to be apprehended soon. Everybody was on his guard, but success in arresting the culprit had not yet been achieved. The Chief Commissioner of Punjab had sensed that if a temporary ban was not imposed on the use of new cartridges, it could lead to disastrous consequences. The pressure for the use of new cartridges would trigger huge unrest and upheaval among the native soldiers, who could spill over from regular to irregular soldiers. The policy of awarding punishment would not prove effective or deterrent because the person who was given punishment earned the sympathy of others, and he would be regarded as a martyr to his religion.

But this warning went unheeded; Commander-in-chief continued emphasizing that the new cartridges must be used. In the first week of May, on the 7th and 8th May, the situation started deteriorating further Sham Singh from the fifth Native infantry told Forsyth, Deputy Commissioner Ambala, again that there was perfect unity among Hindus and Muslims due to frequent interference by the Britishers in their religious affairs. They would oppose the Britisher's tooth and nail together in the coming days, and the Britishers would be massacred in Delhi and Ambala. Which would be initiated by the soldiers, according to the intelligence input received from Ambala Cantt. When the Britishers with their families assembled at the time of the inauguration of the new church, on 10th May 1857, the 5th and 60th Native infantry raised a revolt. Cave Brown shared the information that the soldiers from Lancers and artillery would assemble at one place without any weapons along with the officers of the army and their families with unarmed security guards; 1500 rebels would encircle them and make them captives. Then they would be slaughtered before any help could reach them. But by the grace of God, all escaped unhurt. It was decided on 9th May that since the new church was not yet fully ready for offering prayers, the divine prayers would be offered in the old church, which was located in the midst of the European troops, and 9th Lancers were stationed on one side and the British artillery on the other.

During the prayer, the gathering of the Europeans was kept at a minimum level, and British artillery had also been alerted; thus, the conspiracy of the rebels failed due to the revision of the decision to offer prayers in the new church in favour of the old one. But it seemed that the rebel soldiers had resolved to initiate an uprising. They launched the revolt with their half-baked plan. About the



failure of the first plan, it is really astonishing that no such information is available in the public and private published and unpublished documents. The Britishers concealed all this deliberately. However, a personal letter written on 14th May 1857 by a British officer who was an eyewitness to this development, sheds ample light on this: An open revolt had been launched by the 60th Native infantry, almost on Sunday of 10th May 1857, nine hours before the mutiny broke out at Meerut. They seized weapons from the regimental arsenal and arrested their officers, but they felt nonplussed to find themselves surrounded by better-equipped European soldiers. Under these circumstances, Indian soldiers could not execute their scheme successfully. As shared by an eyewitness, the British soldiers also adopted a defensive stance and dithered to launch any offence. 58 The soldiers had apprehended the British officers and threatened to kill them if someone shot them. Thus, both sides stood transfixed for some time and did nothing against each other. Then they started negotiations. According to the eyewitness, since the Britishers had not attacked them, the Indian rebels retreated. The English people also had no other option considering the delicacy of the situation; they preferred to remain calm. 60 The revolt was waged by 60 th Native Infantry and did not fully subside; the soldiers from the 5th Native Infantry also left their barracks at about 12 O'clock and staged a revolt.

After handling the unrest from one place, the British soldiers went to another turbulent area and surrounded the rebels of the 5th Native Infantry with their superior wing of Cavalry and Artillery; thus the uprising of the 5th Native Infantry was curbed at the initial stage. Trouble erupted at the third place almost simultaneously. The soldiers of the 5th Native Infantry who were on guard duty of the treasury also waged a revolt when they came to know that their own colleagues had launched the revolt. But the British soldiers handled the situation with great acuity and alertness. Soldiers of both the regiments stood their ground armed with their weapons and remained stuck to their position at the drill ground against the British officers, 63 blatantly violating the rules. In the afternoon, Major General Barnard himself went to the soldiers and persuaded them to abandon the revolt, assuring them that they would be pardoned unconditionally. He made the commitment that no disciplinary action would be taken against anyone of them. But no written guarantee was given. The British civil officers also found the situation very challenging and were keen to ensure that this fire of revolt should not penetrate the inner part of Ambala. To prevent it from snowballing into an unmanageable crisis, the prominent officers involved in this mission were George Carnac Branes CS, the commissioner and Supdt. of Ambala Division, cis-Sutlej area and Political Agent for the states and Jagirs; Thomas Dougal Forsyth, CS was, the Collector and Magistrate or the DC Ambala and had with him George Vaughan CS, his Assistant Commissioners (AC). There were five tehsils, Ambala, Jagadhari, Naraingarh, Kharar and Ropar-Ganga Prasad, Saduddin and Muzibiddin were tehsildars at Naraingarh, Ambala and Jagadhari Respectively and Badrul Islam was the Extra Assistant Commissioner. Magistrate Forsyth noted the attitude of the district people, 'The district population had decidedly not enlisted themselves warmly on the part of the Government. There were a number of Feudal lords, along with the masses of the area, who openly and whole heartedly supported the cause of the rebels and gave them full moral and financial support. Prominent among them were Mir of Garhikotaha, some Pathans of Khizrabad and the headman of the villages of Ferozepur, Naraingarh, Thaska and Govindpur helped the rebels to escape across Jamuna at Khizrabad. But a few black sheep also betrayed their brothers and sided with the



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Britishers to seek favours from them, like the Khan of Panjalasa. The preceding discussion makes it amply clear that the moment Indian soldiers came to know that the use of new cartridges was sacrilegious, they decided to oppose it collectively and actively. Their collective opposition in the Indian army erupted into a revolt. So far as Ambala is concerned, its planning was made much earlier than 10th May 1857, as is corroborated by

the statement of Sham Singh and T.D. Forsyth (D. C. Ambalal). The rebel soldiers of Ambala were always in touch with the soldiers of other Cantonments. Capt. Martinue came to know about this plot in the month of March itself. He had communicated this information to the senior officers and made it abundantly clear that a deep-laid conspiracy was being hatched against the British rulers. Since the revolt erupted at Ambala and Meerut on the same day, it implies that the plot had been hatched much in advance. It was not coincidental that the revolt had happened on the same day. To maintain secrecy, the information about this plot was limited to the rebels' leaders.

If we closely examine the events of Ambala and Meerut, we find a number of similarities: one, the soldiers would revolt when Europeans would be praying at the Church on Sunday. The revolt erupted at both places on May 10, and They wanted to nab them unguarded and unaware. Two, the revolt erupted at Ambala Cantonment in the morning while at Meerut in the evening.

Three, the conspiracy for the revolt was pre-planned. The revolt at Meerut was waged by 20<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> native Infantry, which 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry joined. They had their colleagues released from prison. All this was admitted officer of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Light Cavalry named Lt. Gough. As per the concluding part of the strategy, when they reached Delhi from Meerut, they deposed the British rulers and snatched power from them, taking over the reins of British rule. But the plot in Ambala could not be kept a secret; the Indian soldiers of Ambala Cantt could not execute their well chalked out plan successfully and effectively due to the alertness and prudence of the British soldiers. While the rebel soldiers were successful in their mission at Meerut. If the mission had remained clandestine in Ambala, the history of the country would have been radically different; one hundred years old British rule would have come to an end at that very time.

### **Second War Council at Ambala**

2<sup>nd</sup> war Council was held at the residence of Major General Barnard on 17 May 1857, which General Anson attended; all C.O.s of various regiments stationed at Ambala, Brigadier Halifax, Col. Charles Chester and Col. John Lee Land (in charge of artillery). At this meeting of the Council the prevailing situation was deliberated upon; meantime, 2<sup>nd</sup> BN Fusilier (2<sup>nd</sup> BN EF) also reached Ambala on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1857. This meeting also focused on reinforcing the security measures to prevent the law-and-order situation from going out of hand in Ambala and its adjoining areas. Seeing the deteriorating situation of law and order, the families of British officers were shifted to the Mountains in view of security considerations. The British officer Hudson writes that a renewed psychological zeal was sought to be created, ignoring the rampant unrest among the soldiers. But everything was not normal or in order among the troops. To placate the 5<sup>th</sup> N.I., they were assigned the duty to move to Jagadhari, Ropar and Thanesar along with the 4<sup>th</sup> Light Cavalry. It was maintained that their dispersal to different areas would help defuse the tense situation. British Army needed food, grain and funds etc. Cave Brown writes that the native people at Ambala were not

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ready to lend money even on interest and had even ceased supplying essential commodities to them. The news about the revolt in Delhi was reaching Ambala, which turned the British into a state of fear. Following the orders of Major/C.O. Maitland, the enquiry being made against the rebel regiment, was suspended for the time being. All this suggests the sense of fear gripping the mind of Britishers. They admitted that the situation in Ambala was not expected; instead, it was chaotic and scary. The Britishers still suspected the loyalty of the rebel leaders, who were enumerated as Subedar Sheikh Faiz Ulla Khan, Ananti Mishra, Bikhani Khan, Parmeshwar Pandey, Beni Mishra, Hav. Gayadut Pathak, Devi Singh, Bishambar Singh; Sipahi Ram Charan Singh, Ram Karan Singh, Rustam Khan, Ram Harak Thakur, Thakur Singh, Devi Prasad. Two companies of the 5th Native Infantry proceeded from Ambala Cantt. to Delhi to keep guard on Lahori Gate, Ajmeri Gate, Kisan Ganj, etc. they also turned rebellious after reaching Delhi. They joined the rebel soldiers on 28th May 1857 instead of performing the duty assigned to them. On 23rd May, Anson, through a letter, apologized to Lord Canning for mishandling the situation emerging from the rebellious activities of the 5th Native Infantry. If they had been dealt with firmly, the situation could have been controlled easily and would not have taken such a grim shape; keeping in view the growing unrest among the troops of the 5th Native Infantry, Major Maitland stripped them of all their weaponry. Two companies which had waged a revolt at Ropar were disbanded. The troops of these companies were court-martialed and sentenced to death. They were executed even without permission from the headquarters. The commissioner of Ambala issued an order that rebel soldiers be shot dead.

### **British Army and a reign of Terror and Suppression**

When the British army proceeded towards Delhi from Ambala to regain control over Delhi, the repressive policy was followed quite blatantly. The English soldiers inflicted brutalities and ruthless atrocities on the rebel soldiers and civilians. Not only were they awarded heart-wrenching punishment, but their property was also seized. Many villages were burnt down. Government retaliated and gave full freedom to the civil officers' police, and military to let loose repressive measures indiscriminately. The people of Haryana were subjected to inhuman cruelties for over a year from June 1857 onward. Martial Law was clamped upon Ambala and Thanesar in June 1857. Five soldiers from 2 Companies of the 5th Native Infantry were picked out and executed after a summary trial. Sardar Mohar Singh from Ropar was executed on 5th June 1857. (84) Four J.C.O. was court-martialed on the charge of concealing the conspiracy of revolt and were also sentenced to death. George Campbell was passing through Ambala at the time when the four JCOs were being executed. He writes that the scene of their execution was heart-rending. Draconian law No. XIV Act 1857 was introduced, which armed the officers with untrammelled powers. This act was followed by another act XVI Act of 1857, which had a provision for very stringent punishment. The Britishers grossly misused both these Draconian laws. About 1500 soldiers from the 45th native Infantry turned rebels, 20 of whom were captured, and by conducting a charade of trial, British rule over Delhi. He reached Ambala on 6th August 1857; British officers were full of frustration and despair even though they had achieved success. There are divergent versions of the number of casualties that happened during the course of 1857 Revolt. The number of casualties varies considerably high. So it becomes difficult to verify the truth of these conflicting claims. According to a comparatively reliable version, 200 rebel soldiers, 130 rebel soldiers of the 5th and 60th



regiments, were shot dead ruthlessly. In contradiction to this version, When rebel soldiers were ordered to be incarcerated in Ambala prison, they all decided to flee. The European soldiers chased them, killed 135 in just 10 minutes, arrested 35, and about 40 managed to escape. The cruelties inflicted by the Britishers on Ambala's people had far-reaching devastating impacts on every sphere of life. Their agricultural land was seized and ruined. Prices of essential commodities soared sky-high, fear and frustration seized the mind of the people, and they lived in the shadow of imminent brutal they were executed at Ambala. The troops from the 36th Native Infantry also waged a rebellion when they were moving towards Delhi. JCO Digpal Singh, Hawaldar Kashi Ram and Jiya Lal Dubey led them very intelligently and courageously, etc.

They fought very bravely in Delhi. There are different versions of the number of rebels put to death. According to one version, 123 rebels were put to the gallons after a pretence of conducting a trial against them. 90 Their cases were heard by District head officer Mr. Barnes C.S. According to another version, 258 rebels were slain, and 102 of them were put behind bars. 91 General Forsyth remarks that the district's people's attitude hardened against the Britishers. The conditions had slowly changed by August 1857 when British Commander John Nicholson re-established attacks. The brave hearts of Ambala paid a very heavy price in terms of their life's financial, social and cultural aspects. Despite the ever-intensifying repressive policies of the Britishers, the people did not feel disheartened or demoralized, their fighting spirit remained unabated, and they renewed their resolution to drive out the Britishers from India as the opportune moments came. The people of Ambala deserve applause and heartfelt appreciation for being the pioneers in launching a Freedom Movement in 1857, though it could not culminate in the desired success.

## **Conclusion**

Thus 26 sepoy, sowar and other ranks were executed in Ambala between 6 April and 7 May 1858. In Who's who of Indian Martyrs. ed. P.N. Chopra, Gol publication, some of them have been shown from Ludhiana Regiment or the 2nd Ludhiana Regiment, but there were no such regiments in 1857. The 3rd NI was partly in Phillaur and partly in Ludhiana and had mutinied. They came to Ambala from Jullundur via Ludhiana to escape to Delhi, and some were caught on the way.

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  - This information has been given only by Kanhaya Lal , Tarikh-i-Bhagawat-i-Hind, p. 12 Dr. K.C. Yadav, Ibid p. 39. A former C-in-C of the British India Army, Field Marshal Roberts wrote in 1897, the recent researches & Mr. Forest in the records of Govt. of India prove that the lubricating mixture used in preparing the cartridges was actually composed of the objectionable ingredients, cow's fate and lard, and that incredible disregard of soldiers religious prejudices was displayed in manufacture of these cartridges. Field Marshal Fredrick Roberts, forty one years in •India: From
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