

The British Indian Army and the North-West Frontier Expeditions: A Case Study of Ambilah Expedition, 1863

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Abstract

Colonial British launched the Ambilah expedition against the Hindustani Mujahideen; the companions of Ahmed Bareilvi (1786-1831), commonly known as Syaid Ahmed Shahid, came from Rai Bareilly to wage jihad against the Sikhs on the North-West Frontier (present-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). After Sayyid Ahmed's death in 1831 at the famous Battle of Balakot, the remaining Mujahideen settled in Sitana under the patronage of Sayyid Akbar Shah. Thereafter, on the termination of the Sikh Rule in 1849, these Mujahidin directed their attacks against the Colonial British, who had prolonged their sphere of influence to the Pakhtun majority areas of the North-West Frontier and they first came into contact with them through their first expedition under Lieutenant-Colonel Mackeson in 1853. During the famous uprising of 1857, the East India Company faced some problems in the North-West Frontier region of India. At that critical juncture in a responsive way the colonial authorities sent more expeditions in 1857-1858 and finally in 1863 they sent more forces of British Indian Army comprised of different regiments through whom they settled the problems for time being.

Keywords: Ambilah expedition, Colonial British, Hindustani Mujahidin, British Indian Army, North-West Frontier.

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Introduction

Ambilah is the name of a pass which links Buner with Mardan. This pass has great history and it remained a gateway to the foreign invaders. It is argued that, in 326-27 BCE, this pass was crossed by Alexander the Great during his march to the Indian subcontinent, and later in 1863 the mighty British forces were strongly resisted in this pass for about two months at the time of Ambilah Campaign.¹

The Ambilah expedition (also called Ambilah *jihad/ghaza* by local Pakhtuns) was launched by the colonial British against the Hindustani Mujahidin, followers of Sayyid Ahmad Barailvi (1786-1831) popularly known as Sayyid Ahmad Shaheed, who arrived to the North-West Frontier from Rai Barailvi for pursuing *jihad* against the Sikhs.² He arrived to the Frontier in 1823 and appeared upon the Yusufzi frontier of Peshawar region with several Mujahidin by the way of Qandahar and Kabul. After arriving to the area, he started preaching of *jihad*. Therefore, many people followed and joined him and the number of his followers increased and reached to 900.³

However, in the start of 1827, Sayyid Ahmad Barailvi went to Nowshera to besiege Attok, but Ranjit Singh was ready for him. A battle took place in which Sayyid Ahmad Barailvi was defeated with countless slaughter.⁴ Sayyid Ahmad Barailvi fugitive with some of their followers through Lundkhwar to Swat and then reached Buner. In Buner he was able to motivate the people against the Sikhs and again he was accompanied by hundreds of people.⁵ Then he moved to Panjtar, there Fateh Khan, the leader of the Khudu Khel, gave him warm welcome and his position thus greatly strengthened. In 1829, he succeeded in placing Yusufzi and Peshawar entirely under his command.⁶ In response, the Sikhs organized expedition against him and his men, in which Sayyid Ahmad Barailvi and his followers were greatly massacred.⁷ After this tussle, he crossed the River Indus and advanced to Balakot, where he was defeated by the Sikhs and killed.⁸ Out of 1,600 Mujahidin who took the field

with him, only 300 escaped to Sitana, an area presently in Buner District. Sayyid Akbar Shah provided home for them in Sitana and they settled there and formed a colony and constructed a fort named as Mandi.⁹ On the termination of the Sikh Rule in 1849, these Mujahidin directed their attacks against the British, who had extended their sphere of influence to the Pakhtun majority areas of the North-West Frontier.¹⁰

Expedition under Lieutenant-Colonel Mackeson, 1853

Mujahidin constantly involved in anti-British activities and committed constant depredations in the British controlled territories and they make alliance with the Hasanzai tribe and conquered the fort of Kotla (which belonged to the Nawab of Amb). In response, in 1853 it became indispensable for the British to punish the Mujahidin. In January 1853, Lieutenant-Colonel Mackeson moved with the following 2000 troops against them, as;

- “Two Guns, Mountain Train Battery”
- “1th Sikh Infantry”
- “3rd Sikh Infantry”
- “Two Dogra Regiments of the Kashmir Army”
- “Six Wallpieces” and
- “Six Zamburaks.”¹¹

In this expedition both the Nawab of Amb and British forces jointly , recaptured the fort and Mujahidin fled to the nearby hills and lost their strength in this expedition.¹² Later at the time of 1857 uprising, the East India Company faced some problems in the North-West Frontier. In Nowshera certain companies of the 55th Native Infantry showed signs of dissatisfaction and some of them fugitive at Mardan Fort.¹³ The news reached Peshawar that some units of the 55th stationed at Nowshera and had revolted. At that time the political officer, John Nicholson, moved from Peshawar to Nowshera and disarmed the Native Infantry and advanced to Mardan.¹⁴ After the news of Nicholson’s arrival reached the forces left that fort

and fled to the nearby mountains. They were investigated, 120 of them were slaughtered, 300-400 were injured and 150 were arrested.¹⁵ But some took shelter in the locality of Khudu Khel, whose Khan was anti-British and there they settled at a place called Mangal Thana.¹⁶ Due to these constant incursions against the British, thus they were termed “Hindustani Fanatics.”¹⁷

Expedition of 1857 under Major Vaughan

During these agitations, Mubariz Khan of Chingalai requested the Mujahidin to his village. Due to the conflicts of the Mujahidin with the British, Major Vaughan marched to Sheikh Jana with the following forces;

- “224 Pounder Howitzers”
- “4 Guns Peshawar Mountain Train Battery”
- “50 Bayonets, 27th Foot”
- “50 Bayonets, 70th Foot”
- “50 Bayonets, 87th Foot”
- “150 Sabres, 2nd Punjab Cavalry” (later changed to 22nd Cavalry)
- “50 Bayonets, 21th Native Infantry” (later named 1st Brahmans)
- “400 Bayonets, 5th Punjab Infantry” (later named 58th Vaughan’s Rifles)
- “200 Bayonets, 6th Punjab Infantry” (later named 59th Scinde Rifles)
- “150 Bayonets, 16th Punjab Infantry” (later named 24th Punjabis)
- “225 Mounted Levies and Police” and
- “100 Foot Levies and Police.”¹⁸

The areas of Sheikh Jana and Naranji Village were shattered by Major Vaughan’s forces in July 1857.¹⁹ But the spirit of the people was in no way broken and they again started rebellious activities and continuously attacked British officials.²⁰

Expedition of 1858 under Major-General Sydney Cotton

On 22 April 1858, one more expedition in the charge of Major-General Sydney Cotton was led against the Mujahidin. It numbered about 4877 of all ranks. There were two brigades of these forces, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Renny and Major Alban respectively. Before the crossing of Frontier, these forces further divided into three columns.²¹ The forces gathered at the border village of Salim Khan and started penetration to the area.²² The areas of Panjtar, Chingalai, Mangal Thana and Sitana were destroyed.²³ In May 1858, the Gadun and Utmanzai clans combined made a settlement with the British under which they will not to allow the Mujahidin and Sayyids of Sitana to return to Sitana.²⁴

Unrest on the Border of British Controlled Territories (1859-1862)

After 1858, the Hindustani Mujahidin settle down at Malka and in 1861 reached Sitana and started disturbances on the border. So in this regard, the Gadun and Utmanzai were therefore placed under blockade. On 2 October 1861, both tribes with new agreement agreed to banish the Sayyids and Mujahidin, but it was not enforced till 1862.²⁵ It was stated that, on 5 July 1863, the Sayyids and Mujahidin had recaptured Sitana. Upon the inquiry of the British authorities, both Gadun and Utmanzai blamed each other. The Mujahidin also sent intimidating letters to the Nawab of Amb (British ally). A blockade was re-imposed upon the Utmanzai and Gadun and soldiers were sent to protect the Amb State.²⁶

On the 3 September 1863 at night the Mujahidin attacked the camp of Corps Guides²⁷ at Topi and around the mid-September on the instigation of Maulvi Abdullah (leader of Mujahidin) the Hasanzai tribe attacked the advance station of the Amb State area. They prepared another assault on the Amb State Levies on the Black Mountain frontier, in which several people were killed and some were wounded.²⁸

Ambilah Expedition of 1863 under Brigadier-General Nevil Chamberlain

In response to these problems, the colonial authorities decided to send one more expedition against the Mujahidin. In this regard, they sent a force in the charge of Brigadier-General Nevil Chamberlain in 1863. So this campaign was called Ambilah expedition, 1863. The forces began their encroachment on 19 October from Peshawar to stamp out the insurgents for once and for all.²⁹ During this campaign the Akhund of Swat and other neighboring tribes took part and a bloody fight took place at Crag Piquet and Eagle's Nest (British camps at Ambilah).³⁰

Marching of Forces

The force was consisted of two Indian Army columns, numbering 6000 troops supported by nineteen field and guns.³¹ One column operated from the Peshawar, the other from Hazara. The Peshawar column was gathered at Nawa Kalay and Swabi, then they moved through Ambilah pass and occupied Kauga in Chamla Valley and thence marched to Sitana. And Hazara column stationed at Darband to control the river side tribes and to protect the Hazara border.³² On 13 October General Chamberlain reached Swabi and then advanced to Darband pass with these troops;

“Peshawar Mountain Train Battery”

“Hazara Mountain Train Battery”

“1st Punjab Infantry (55th Coke's Rifles)” and

“5th Gurkha Regiment.”

The other troops of the expeditionary forces stationed at Nawa Kalay, then on 19 October these troops marched from Nawa Kalay and combined at Parmalao with the advanced column. These stationary troops at Nawa Kalay consisted of these regiments;

“100 Sabres, Guides Cavalry”

“100 Sabres, 11 Bengal Cavalry” (later named the 11th Lancers)

“Guides Infantry”

“71st Foot (1st Battalion Highland Light Infantry)”

“5th Punjab Infantry”

“20 Punjab Native Infantry (20th Punjabis)” and

“27th Punjab Native Infantry (27th Punjabis).”³³

The Imperial troops advanced and were stopped at the Ambilah Pass when it was attacked by a large number of Swatis, Bunerwals and Hindustani Mujahidin. The severe fighting sustained for two months for the seizing of Crag Piquet, Eagle’s Nest and Conical Hill. The war strategy of the local people was to attack at nights which were difficult for the British forces.³⁴

In that critical juncture the British forces sent letters for begging more and yet more troops. Hugh Rose, the Commander-in-Chief of the British army, ordered for large reinforcement and dispatched 3000 troops to the Frontier. The reinforcement was sent under Lieutenant-Colonel Vaughan. The force consisted of;

“Hazara Mountain Battery”

“30 Marksmen, 71st and 10th Regiments”

“200 Rifles, 71st Regiments”

“5th Punjab Infantry” and

“6th Punjab Infantry.”³⁵

On 20th October 1863 these troops advanced to the locality of the Eagle’s Nest and Crag Piquet and occupied it after repulsing of certain attacks of the local people.³⁶ Lastly on 17 December, the Buner *jargah* approved the British terms.

The terms were;³⁷

- i. To dismiss the British Indian Army on the Buner Pass.
- ii. To destroy Malka in presence of the British officers.
- iii. To expel the Hindustani Mujahidin from Buner, Amazi, and Chamla.

iv. To give their chiefs as hostages for the fulfillment of the above requirements.³⁸

Finally the expedition ended on 22 December with extensively high losses on both parties.

The British lost 238 men and 670 injured while the tribes lost 3000 killed and some injured.³⁹

Hundreds of pages of colonial justification failed to conclude that this ultimate village raid

was a fiasco second only to the loss of an entire colonial army in the 1839-42 first Anglo-

Afghan War. After the Ambilah expedition the Mujahidin didn't associate with any

opposition towards the British and tried to have cordial terms with them.⁴⁰



THE AMBELA CAMPAIGN, 1863

SIR NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN'S POSITION
ON THE AMBELA PASS

OCTOBER 20—DECEMBER 16, 1863

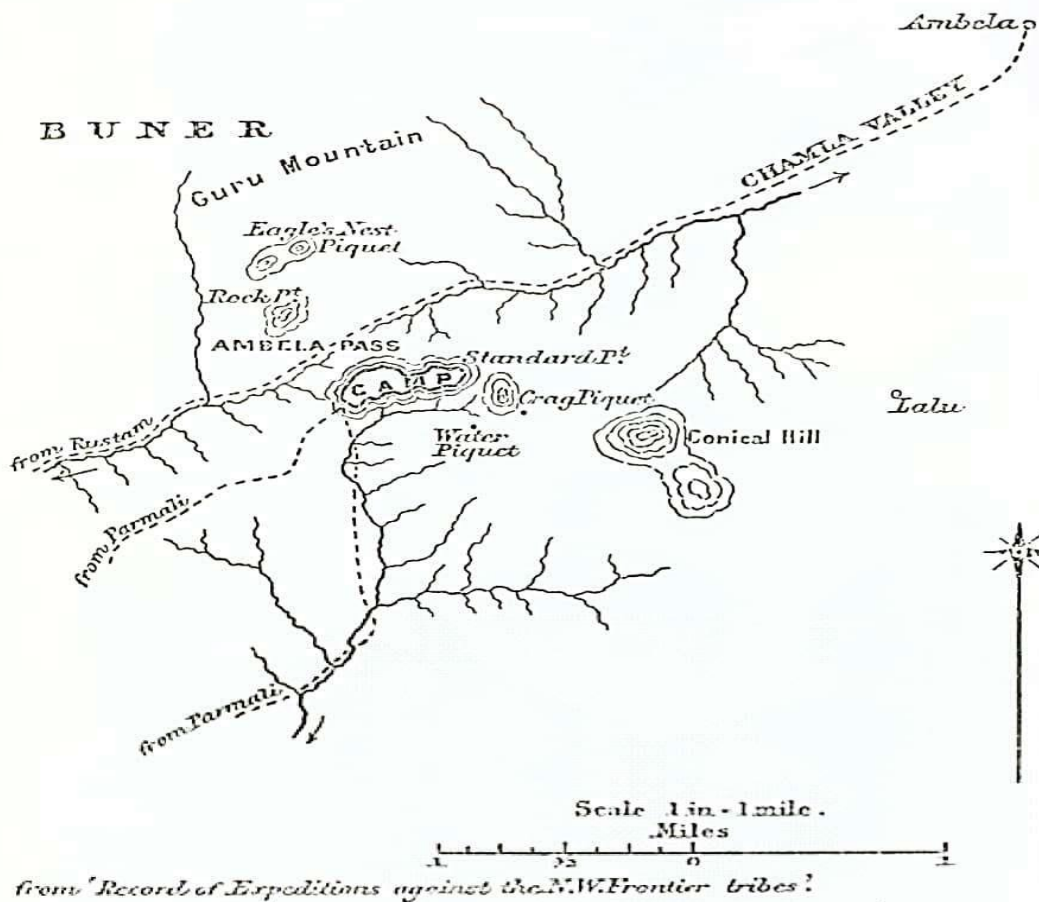


Fig. 1. A Short Sketch of Ambilah Expedition, 1863,

Conclusion

In the result of Second Anglo-Sikh War in 1849, Punjab became part of the British and led to the extension of British boundaries in the North-West Frontier. Therefore, British came politically and military in direct contact with the Pukhtuns of the North-West Frontier, and a new chapter in the history of British Raj in India begin. British were the predecessors of Sikhs who had neither central government nor well-defined boundaries in the North-West Frontier. This creates more problems for the British and faced more troubles in the North-West Frontier as compare to other parts of India. In this regards, Ambilah Expedition, 1863, is one of the examples from which we can easily understand how the British faced difficulties in the Pukhtun areas. But the British under their imperial policy—collaborative relations with Indian natives, in the form of British Indian Army up to some succeeded in their mission for which they launched Ambilah Expedition. Due to strategic location of the Frontier, after Ambilah Campaign, British Indian Army changed their defensive policy towards the North-West Frontier. Eventually, they organized well established defensive policy and built about fifteen forts at important places and fifteen posts of various kinds in the Frontier regions and British Indian Army garrisons were stationed to prevent this type of disturbances in future.

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