

## “General Zorawar Singh: Revisiting his Life, Legacy and Legendary Conquests of the Himalayan Territories”

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General Zorawar Singh was arguably one of the most outstanding military generals in Indian history. A valiant, brilliant, diplomatic, and visionary military leader, his series of conquests in the trans-Himalayan region remain unmatched and remarkable, both in the annals of the military history of India and in the process of the making of modern India. His charismatic leadership inspired such loyalty in his men that they were willing to follow him anywhere and, if required, die in the process. Dedicated to the service of his master Maharaja Gulab Singh, he was wise enough to understand the imperial design that his master nurtured deep down in his heart. With merely 5000 soldiers at his disposal, he set out to conquer the high-altitude snow-clad Himalayan territories of Ladakh, Baltistan, and even Tibet. Even though he died in the process of realizing a lofty vision of uniting the holy land of Man

Sarovar within his master's domain, his successful military campaign led to the making of one of the largest princely states in India. The enormity of the impact of his series of military exploits in the trans-Himalayan region was such that, for the first time, the mighty colonial power shuddered and experienced an existential crisis in the Himalayan region, and if it had not exerted pressure on Lahore Darbar to call him back, General Zorawar might have ended up conquering Lhasa region. The nation strongly felt the legacy of his conquest after a century when the geographical boundaries of modern India were being drawn after independence.

The life history of General Zorawar Singh, who served Maharaja Gulab Singh, the founder of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, in different capacities for nearly two decades, has a touch of romance. Born in 1784 in a Rajput family in Kahlur (Bilaspur) state, which was then part of Punjab, he left his village at a very young age and traveled to Haridwar in search of employment. After spending some time there, he moved to Jammu and joined the army of Rana Jaswant Singh of Ramnagar at the age of sixteen. It is believed that he received his formal traditional training in swordsmanship and archery there and soon became one of the best soldiers of Ramnagar. He also served as a sepoy of Kiladar of Reasi, where his intelligence, enterprising nature, and courage were noticed. He was given bigger roles by Kiladar, such as delivering messages to Raja Gulab Singh. Little did he realize then that this would change his life. He impressed Raja Gulab Singh with his sincerity and efficiency and rose to the rank of commandant of Reasi Fort. He then became the governor (wazir-e-wizart) of Kishtwar and the commissariat officer of all forts north of Jammu.

While Zorawar Singh continued rising in ranks and the esteem of his master, the politics in Lahore Darbar and the forms of their contestation with the colonial authority had also started acquiring new configurations. Maharaja Gulab Singh, a sagacious and ambitious ruler, could see the inevitable decline of the Sikh power and the resultant chaos and political vacuum that would follow the demise of Ranjit Singh. He, therefore, decided to carve out an empire for himself. He carefully assessed the political landscape. He realized that the British, by the Treaty of Amritsar in 1809, had barred his expansion to the east; by their support of the Amirs of Sind in 1838, there was little possibility of his advance to the south; and the Afghans, in the west, had resisted his encroachment beyond a certain limit.

Hemmed in such a situation, Gulab Singh decided to pursue a carefully calibrated active policy of territorial aggrandizement to the north of Jammu and the east of Kashmir, in Ladakh. Incidentally, neither the colonial authority nor Maharaja Ranjit Singh ever manifested any interest in these areas.

Taking advantage of the indifference of the two formidable powers, Maharaja Gulab Singh chose his most valiant general Zorawar Singh Kahluria to actualize his imperial dream in the trans-Himalayan region. He dispatched him with 4,000 infantrymen to subjugate the territory between Jammu and the Tibetan border in 1819 and thus began the story of the most arduous and audacious wars ever waged by any military commander in the long annals of India.

To avoid the attention of the Lahore Durbar which was controlling Kashmir at that time, General Zorawar Singh Kahluria, decided to march through Kishtwar into the province of Oudh, defeat the Tibetan army at Sankoo and capture Leh, the capital of Ladakh. Not ever accustomed to being dominated by the powers of the plain, there were several occasions when Ladakh rose in revolts which were largely the doings either of the Chinese power or the disgruntled and jealous elements of the Lahore Durbar. General Zorawar Singh however, was not a soldier to wait. He, therefore, kept on making continual military interventions to ensure that the Ladakh was conquered and subordinated for good. He also built several forts and garrisons in Ladakh to secure his position. After the conquest of Ladakh, he kept on pushing the boundaries of his conquest further. In the process, he braved several perilous paths of the Himalayas, crossed the furious streams and lakes, and ascended the towering heights and by 1841 he managed to bring Ladakh, and Gilgit-Baltistan under his control.

Zorawar Singh was not the general to rest on his laurels. He resolved to march further toward Tibet. Thus, in May 1841, he led a formidable host of about 6,000 men, mostly Ladakhis, Baltis, and

Kishtwaris, along the Indus Valley into the Tibetan lands. He met with swift and decisive victories. He sacked Hanlea and Tashigong, subdued Rudok and Garo, and vanquished a small Tibetan force to capture Gartok. The triumph of Zorawar now aroused the apprehension of the colonial authority. They feared not only losing their trade monopoly but also the resurgence of a possible alliance between Lahore and Nepal, the only potent and independent native states in the subcontinent. Thus, began a frantic correspondence and parleys with different representatives of the colonial authority to check the further advances of Zorawar Singh.

Unfazed by the new political configuration arising on the horizon, Zorawar and his army continued their conquest. They severed the trade route between Sinkiang and Bashahr and reached Takiakot after securing several stations along the way. Brian Hodgson, a British observer, feared that they would not stop until they reached Lhasa. Zorawar's threat to march on Lhasa if Ladakh did not retain its monopoly of the shawl wool trade, the apprehension of a Dogra-Nepal alliance, and a report from Joseph Cunningham, another British observer in Tibet, that "all trade especially in shawl wool to the Company's provinces is at a standstill or has been prohibited," prompted the Governor-General to take action. He set a deadline of December 10 for Zorawar's withdrawal to Ladakh. Sher Singh, who had succeeded to the throne in Lahore after the death of Nao Nehal Singh complied with the order and recalled Zorawar from Tibet and the British frontier. One does not know whether the order reached General Zorawar Singh or not, he was attacked by a combined force of Lhasa and Tibet on 10 December 1848. The furry of nature was also not in his favor. It was snowing heavily and there were hardly any resources left with him. This, however, was no reason for a warrior like Zorawar to retreat. He took on the combined forces and withheld them till the fateful day of 12 December, when he was wounded by a bullet. Despite this wound, he continued fighting like a lion till a

Tibetan warrior pierced him through the breast with his lance from a distance.