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[HARKING BACK: Nalwa's ashes remind of a restless spirit wrestling with destiny](#)

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When the Indian journalist Khushwant Singh wished that his ashes be mixed in the soil of his birthplace at Hadali village in Khushab district of Sargodha, and that the walls of his village school use cement mixed with them, it immediately brought to mind my favourite military genius who also had a strange similar wish that was fulfilled.

That person was none other than the Sikh military commander Hari Singh Nalwa, an Uppal of Gujranwala. Uppals are Jaat Khatri originally belonging to the entire north-west region of the Indian sub-continent. Hari Singh was killed in March 1837 while trying to secure the fort of Jamrud while on his way from the fort of Peshawar. On hearing of his arrival, the Afghans fled in fright. Such was his reputation. As a child my interest in Nalwa sprang from stories my father would tell us about how Pathan Yusufzai women still scare their children by threatening them with the sentence “chup sha, Hari raghlay” (“Keep quiet, Hari Singh is coming”).

Later in life I would often in my college days listen, at Hazuri Bagh outside the Lahore Fort, to poets and singers reciting the ‘Nalway de Vaar’ as presented by Punjabi poet Qadir Bakhsh alias Qadaryar, as well as versions by Misr Hari Chand and also Ram Dayal. It was Hari Singh Nalwa who on his death wished that a small portion of his ashes be mixed in the wrestling pit outside the Lahore Fort. This wish most probably was made because it was here, at the age of 14 in 1804, that his career was launched in such an amazing fashion.

Every time I visit the Lahore Fort and pass the northern entrance past the Samadhi of Ranjit Singh, I am reminded of this great man and the old wrestling pit that was to be renamed Attique Stadium. It was here that 14-year old Hari Singh Nalwa in 1804 came to settle a land dispute in the court of Maharajah Ranjit Singh. As he saw a champion wrestler about to be honoured by the maharajah, he boldly stepped forward and claimed he could beat him. It was a foolhardy thing for a tall 14-year old lad to do.

The maharajah was known as a sport, so when the tall lanky boy from near his home town made such a tall boastful claim, he could not resist the temptation of teaching the young handsome boy a lesson. He immediately ordered a match and within a few minutes of the fight starting Nalwa Uppal, who had taken, at the age of 12, the Sikh oath of 'amrit sanchar' as Hari Singh, had thrown the champion wrestler on the ground. It was there and then that the maharajah recruited him as his personal guard.

A few months later while on a 'shikar' he was attacked by a tiger, which after killing his horse set on him. Accounts of the incident, which to me today seem a wee bit exaggerated, tell us that he refused offers of assistance from fellow hunters and tore open the mouth of the tiger with his bare hands. Hence he acquired the nickname of 'Baaghmaar' (tiger killer). After this incident he was recruited in the Khalsa Army and grew up to become its commander-in-chief. He was the man who expanded the frontier of the Punjabi State right up to where today is Pakistan's frontier with Afghanistan. The city of Haripur in Abbottabad is named after him, and his later conquests include the defeat of the Afghan rulers of Kasur and Attock, the crafty ruler of Sialkot, and to the north he captured, after two failed attempts, Hazara and Kashmir and then much later returning to capture Jamrud and Peshawar. To the south he was instrumental in the capture of Multan after a fierce battle.

If anyone represented the aspiration of the fighting men of Punjab, it was this Uppal Jat of Gujranwala. He wanted to retain the martial spirit of the Punjabi army, and no place else was this more demonstrated when in 1831 he fiercely opposed the appointment of Ranjit Singh's son Kharrak Singh as the Prince Regent. One source claims that he told the maharajah: "Appoint a hungry lion, not a drunk jackal." Not one to mince words, it is said that he seldom spoke, but when he did everyone listened.

Once he had captured Kashmir, Hazara and Peshawar, he showed an amazing flair for honest efficient governance. He immediately set up a mint and this facilitated the collection of revenue for the Lahore Darbar. This ability to manage money deftly he seems to have acquired from experience of managing his estate after the death of his father when he was merely 12.

In all we know of 23 battles in which he participated. He was merely 16-year old when he participated in the Battle of Kasur. At the age of 17 he outwitted the crafty Sialkoti commander in a fierce two-day battle. In 1813 at the age of 21 he boldly took on the huge Afghan army of Kabul in the Battle of Attock. Almost 1,000 years ago Kabul was part of the Kingdom of the Punjab under Jayapala the Great, when, initially, Peshawar was his capital and later Lahore. For the first time the Punjab army defeated the Durrans and Barakzais in battles whose fierceness became legendary.

These victories were followed by those at Khangarh and Muzzafargarh and then in 1818 came the decisive Battle of Multan. It dragged on for months and in the initial assault Hari Singh was seriously injured. It took months for him to recover, and when he did he immediately penetrated the fort and captured it. The southern limits of the Lahore Darbar had been defined. Hari Singh Nalwa was given the 'jagir' of Mitha Tiwana.

At exactly that time in August 1818 in-fighting among the ruling Afghan family led to trouble at Peshawar. Hari Singh decided to strike and capture Peshawar. When Ranjit Singh asked him the reason for such a rash decision, he reasoned: "Sarkar, 'dabdaba' (constant pressure), these double-dealing Kabulis can do anything."

The very name of this general was often enough to ensure victory. During the Battle of Nowshera the Afghans sought British help. This was refused, as documents now tell us, because the British estimated that under Hari Singh Nalwa the chances of success were minimum.

But then a call for 'jihad' was rung by Sayyed Ahmed in 1827 and the Yusufzais by the thousands joined the battle. One account claims, a rather wild guesstimate, that 8,000 Sikhs backed by Muslim artillery from Lahore's General Elahi Bakhsh, beat about 150,000 men all bent on 'jihad'. In the end Hari Singh prevailed.

In October 1837 Hari Singh attacked Jamrud in order to capture the Khyber Pass. The fall of Jamrud sent shock waves all around. The fear of Hari Singh Nalwa had become engrained in Pathan minds. At this stage only 600 Sikhs were in Jamrud and Hari Singh held Peshawar Fort. An estimated 25,000 Afghans surrounded Jamrud and Nalwa moved to assist them.

News of his arrival spread like wild fire and panic spread. In the confusion Nalwa was fatally injured. But then he ordered that his dead body be perched on a rod and shown to the Pathans as being 'alive'. On seeing 'Nalwa' on the walls the Afghans quickly dispersed. If today Pakistan's borders are where they are with Afghanistan, it is entirely because of one man: Hari Singh Nalwa. But military genius that he was, he was also a great builder of institutions and infrastructure. In Haripur he invited Khatri to invest and trade. He built the famous Gurdwara Panja Sahib at Hassan Abdal and donated the gold to cover the Harminder Sahib in Amritsar.

But to my mind his most beautiful gesture was to express his dying wish for the place where his story really started, to the wrestling pit outside the Lahore Fort. The gesture demonstrated his love for the land of his origin, of the place where his legendary story really started.

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