



## The Role of Haryana in the Formation and Consolidation of the Sikh State during the 18th Century

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### Abstract

In the 18th century, the decline of Mughal authority and the rise of regional powers reshaped northern India's political landscape, with the Sikh Confederacy emerging as a formidable force. This research paper examines the pivotal role of Haryana in the formation and consolidation of the Sikh state during this transformative period. Strategically located between Punjab and Delhi, Haryana served as a critical corridor for Sikh military campaigns, a fertile economic base for sustaining armies, and a socio-political hub for forging alliances and spreading Sikhism. Through an analysis of Haryana's geographical advantages, agricultural contributions, and dynamic interactions with local communities, this study argues that the region was instrumental in enabling the Sikh *misls* to challenge Mughal and Afghan dominance while establishing a robust political and cultural foundation. By exploring key events and the imposition of the *rakhi* tribute system, this paper highlights how Haryana's multifaceted contributions shaped the Sikh state's resilience and expansion, laying the groundwork for its eventual unification under Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

**Key Words:** Haryana, Sikh Empire, Khalsa Raj, Sikh Confederacy, Political Mobilization

### Introduction

The 18th century marked a period of profound political upheaval in northern India, characterized by the gradual disintegration of Mughal authority and the emergence of regional powers vying for dominance. Following the death of Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, the Mughal Empire faced internal rebellions, administrative decay, and external invasions, creating a power vacuum that allowed local and regional entities to assert autonomy. Among these emerging powers were the Sikhs, whose rise from a religious community to a formidable political and military force reshaped the Punjab and its neighboring regions, including Haryana. The formation of the Sikh state, particularly through the establishment of the Sikh Confederacy or *misls* (independent warrior bands), was a dynamic process rooted in resistance against Mughal oppression and later Afghan incursions.<sup>1</sup> Haryana, situated



strategically between the Sikh-dominated Punjab and the Mughal strongholds of Delhi and Agra, became a critical theater for this transformation. It explores the decline of Mughal authority, the rise of the Sikh *misls*, and Haryana's pivotal position in the evolving political landscape of the 18th century.

The Mughal Empire, once a dominant force in the Indian subcontinent, began to unravel in the early 18th century due to a combination of internal weaknesses and external pressures. Aurangzeb's prolonged military campaigns in the Deccan drained imperial resources, while his policies alienated key regional allies, including Rajputs and Jats. The Mughal administration struggled with factionalism, corrupt governance, and succession disputes, which weakened central authority. By the 1720s, regional governors (*subahdars*) and local zamindars began asserting independence, further fragmenting the empire. In northern India, invasions by Persian ruler Nadir Shah (1739) and Afghan leader Ahmad Shah Abdali (1747–1761) exposed Mughal vulnerabilities, particularly in the Punjab and Haryana regions.<sup>2</sup> These invasions disrupted trade, agriculture, and governance, creating opportunities for groups like the Sikhs to challenge Mughal dominance. The weakening of Mughal control in Haryana, a region historically under Delhi's administrative orbit, made it a contested zone where local powers, including Jats, Rajputs, and Sikhs, sought to establish influence.

The Sikh community, initially founded as a religious movement by Guru Nanak in the 15th century, evolved into a martial force under Guru Gobind Singh in the late 17th century with the creation of the Khalsa in 1699. The Khalsa's emphasis on militancy and egalitarianism provided the ideological and organizational framework for Sikh resistance against Mughal persecution. Following Guru Gobind Singh's death in 1708, the Sikhs, under leaders like Banda Singh Bahadur, launched campaigns to challenge Mughal authority in Punjab and its adjoining areas. Although Banda's rebellion was suppressed by 1716, his campaigns laid the groundwork for the Sikh *misls*, semi-autonomous warrior bands that emerged in the 1730s and 1740s. By the mid-18th century, the *misls*—such as the Phulkian, Bhangi, and Sukerchakia—had organized into a loose confederacy known as the *Dal Khalsa*, which operated under a collective leadership model.<sup>3</sup> These *misls* controlled territories in Punjab and began expanding into neighboring regions like Haryana, leveraging the region's resources and strategic location to consolidate their power.

Haryana's geographical and socio-political significance made it a linchpin in the Sikh state's formation and consolidation. Located between the fertile Punjab plains and the Mughal heartland of Delhi, Haryana served as a transitional zone and a critical corridor for military



and trade activities. The region encompassed key towns like Ambala, Kurukshetra, Karnal, and Panipat, which were not only agriculturally rich but also strategically vital due to their proximity to major trade routes, such as the Grand Trunk Road.<sup>4</sup> Haryana's fertile plains supported a robust agrarian economy, which became a source of revenue and sustenance for Sikh armies. Politically, Haryana was a mosaic of diverse communities, including Jats, Rajputs, and Muslims, whose alliances and rivalries shaped regional power dynamics. The weakening Mughal grip on Haryana allowed Sikh *misls* to conduct raids, collect tribute (*rakhi*), and establish control over key towns, transforming the region into a buffer zone against Mughal and Afghan forces. Moreover, Haryana's historical significance as a site of major battles and its cultural ties to Punjab's martial traditions made it a natural extension of Sikh influence. Haryana's position as a contested frontier amplified its importance in the Sikh state's evolution. The region was a battleground for competing powers, including the Mughals, Afghans, Marathas, and Sikhs, each seeking to dominate its resources and strategic routes. For the Sikhs, Haryana was not only a source of economic wealth but also a staging ground for military campaigns aimed at weakening Mughal and Afghan authority.<sup>5</sup> The *misls* used Haryana's terrain for guerrilla warfare, exploiting its proximity to Delhi to launch raids and disrupt Mughal supply lines. Additionally, Haryana's diverse population provided opportunities for alliances with local Jat and Rajput chieftains, who shared grievances against Mughal rule. These alliances bolstered Sikh influence in the region, enabling the *misls* to establish governance structures and integrate Haryana into their emerging state. The region's role as a recruitment ground for Sikh warriors, combined with the spread of Sikhism through gurdwaras and preaching, further cemented its significance in the consolidation of Sikh identity and power.

Haryana's strategic significance in the 18th century stemmed from its geographical position, which made it a critical corridor for military, political, and economic activities during the formation and consolidation of the Sikh state. Located between the Sikh heartland of Punjab and the Mughal capital of Delhi, Haryana served as a pivotal transitional zone, influencing the Sikh *misls'* ability to project power, disrupt enemy supply lines, and establish territorial control. Haryana's location made it a natural gateway for Sikh military campaigns aimed at challenging Mughal and Afghan authority.<sup>6</sup> The region's proximity to Delhi, the political and symbolic center of Mughal power, positioned it as a frontline for Sikh raids and conquests. Key towns such as Kurukshetra, Karnal, Panipat, and Ambala were strategically vital due to their placement along major routes connecting Punjab to the Gangetic plains. For instance,



Panipat, a historic battleground, was a focal point for military engagements, including the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761, where the Sikhs, despite setbacks, leveraged the region's terrain to regroup and reassert influence. Haryana's flat plains and proximity to river systems, such as the Yamuna, facilitated mobility for Sikh cavalry and guerrilla units, enabling rapid strikes against Mughal garrisons and supply convoys.<sup>7</sup> The region's geography also provided defensive advantages, with its network of forts and natural barriers used by Sikh *misls* to counter invasions from Afghan forces under Ahmad Shah Abdali.

### **Military Campaigns**

Haryana served as a staging ground for Sikh military operations, particularly during the 1730s to 1760s, when the *misls* sought to expand their influence southward. The rise of Sikh state after the gurus starts with the battle of sonipat (Haryana) in 1709 by Baba Banda Singh Bahadur.<sup>8</sup> The Sikh victory at the Battle of Karnal (1739) against Mughal forces demonstrated Haryana's role as a theater for undermining Mughal authority.<sup>9</sup> Sikh leaders, such as Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and Ala Singh of the Phulkian *misl*, conducted frequent raids into Haryana, targeting Mughal outposts and revenue collection centers. These raids disrupted Mughal administration and enriched Sikh coffers through plunder and tribute. Haryana's open terrain was ideal for the Sikh *misls'* guerrilla warfare tactics, which relied on mobility, surprise attacks, and evasion.<sup>10</sup> For example, after the Afghan invasions of the 1750s, the Sikhs used Haryana as a base to harass retreating Afghan armies, weakening their hold over northern India. The region's strategic depth also allowed the Sikhs to retreat and regroup after military setbacks, as seen in the post-Panipat recovery, where Haryana became a springboard for renewed Sikh offensives. Haryana's position along major trade routes, particularly the Grand Trunk Road, amplified its strategic importance. This historic route, connecting Punjab to Delhi and beyond, was a lifeline for commerce and military logistics. By establishing control over key Haryana towns like Ambala and Thanesar, the Sikh *misls* disrupted Mughal and Afghan supply lines, weakening their ability to sustain prolonged campaigns.<sup>11</sup> Control over these routes also allowed the Sikhs to impose tolls and collect protection money (*rakhi*), integrating Haryana into their economic and political sphere. The trade routes facilitated the movement of goods, information, and troops, enabling the Sikhs to coordinate operations across Punjab and Haryana. This control not only bolstered Sikh military efforts but also established Haryana as a critical economic node in the emerging Sikh state.<sup>12</sup>

### **Economic Contributions**



Haryana's economic contributions were vital to the Sikh state's formation and consolidation, providing the resources necessary to sustain military campaigns and establish governance structures. The region's fertile agricultural base, combined with its role in revenue collection, made it a cornerstone of the Sikh *misls*' economic strategy.

- Agricultural Base

Haryana's fertile plains, watered by the Yamuna and Ghaggar rivers, supported a robust agrarian economy that was critical for provisioning Sikh armies. The region's agricultural productivity, centered on crops like wheat, barley, and pulses, ensured a steady supply of food for Sikh warriors during campaigns. Villages in Haryana, particularly in areas like Kurukshetra and Karnal, became key sources of grain and fodder, enabling the *misls* to maintain mobile forces without relying heavily on distant Punjab resources. Local agrarian communities, including Jat peasants, played a crucial role in supporting Sikh campaigns, either voluntarily or through coercion, by providing supplies and labor.<sup>13</sup> This agricultural surplus also allowed the Sikhs to sustain prolonged conflicts, such as their resistance against Afghan invasions in the 1750s and 1760s. Haryana's role as a breadbasket was thus indispensable to the Sikh state's military and administrative endurance.

- Tribute and Taxation

The Sikh *misls* implemented a system of tribute known as *rakhi*, a protection tax levied on Haryana's towns and villages in exchange for safeguarding them from external threats, including Mughal and Afghan raids. This system not only generated significant revenue but also established Sikh authority over the region's economic resources. By the mid-18th century, *misls* such as the Phulkian and Bhangi had established semi-permanent control over parts of Haryana, collecting regular tribute from local landlords and merchants. For instance, the Phulkian *misl* under Ala Singh secured territories around Patiala, integrating Haryana's economic output into the Sikh state's revenue system.<sup>14</sup> This taxation model strengthened the *misls*' financial base, enabling them to fund military campaigns, maintain fortifications, and support administrative structures. Additionally, the Sikhs' ability to extract resources from Haryana disrupted Mughal revenue collection, further weakening their rivals and consolidating Sikh dominance in the region.

- Economic Integration

Haryana's economic integration into the Sikh state extended beyond agriculture and tribute. The region's markets, such as those in Ambala and Thanesar, became hubs for trade in goods like textiles, grains, and livestock, which the Sikhs leveraged to bolster their economy. By



controlling key trade routes, the *misls* facilitated commerce between Punjab and Haryana, fostering economic interdependence. This integration helped stabilize Sikh governance in the region, as local communities benefited from the security and trade opportunities provided by Sikh rule.<sup>15</sup> The economic contributions of Haryana thus played a dual role: sustaining the Sikh *misls*' military efforts and laying the foundation for a more structured Sikh state under leaders like Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the early 19th century.

### Socio-Political Dynamics

Haryana's socio-political landscape was a complex mosaic of communities, including Jats, Rajputs, Muslims, and others, whose interactions with the Sikh *misls* shaped the region's role in the formation and consolidation of the Sikh state. The region's diverse population, combined with its cultural and religious ties to Punjab, made it a fertile ground for alliances, recruitment, and the spread of Sikhism.

- Local Alliances

The Sikh *misls* forged strategic alliances with Haryana's local communities, particularly the Jats, who shared martial traditions and grievances against Mughal rule. Jat chieftains in regions like Rohtak and Hisar collaborated with the Sikhs, providing manpower and local knowledge in exchange for protection and shared authority. These alliances were critical during campaigns against Mughal and Afghan forces, as local support enabled the Sikhs to navigate Haryana's terrain and counter enemy fortifications. Rajput and other non-Jat communities also occasionally aligned with the Sikhs, particularly when opposing Afghan invasions.<sup>16</sup> For example, during Ahmad Shah Abdali's campaigns in the 1750s, some Haryana communities supported Sikh resistance to secure their own autonomy. These alliances not only strengthened Sikh military efforts but also integrated Haryana's socio-political elites into the Sikh state's governance framework, fostering regional loyalty.

- Religious Influence

Haryana's role as a center for the spread of Sikhism was significant in consolidating the Sikh state's cultural and political identity. The establishment of gurdwaras in key towns like Kurukshetra and Panipat served as focal points for Sikh preaching and community organization. Sikh leaders, including prominent *misl* chiefs, promoted the Khalsa's egalitarian ideals, attracting converts from Haryana's Jat and other peasant communities. The shared martial ethos of the Khalsa and Haryana's warrior castes facilitated recruitment, with many young men from the region joining Sikh armies. The spread of Sikhism also created a shared ideological framework that unified diverse communities under Sikh leadership,



strengthening the *misls*' hold over Haryana. Gurdwaras, such as those in Ambala, became symbols of Sikh authority, reinforcing the region's integration into the Sikh state.<sup>17</sup>

- Resistance to External Powers

Haryana's socio-political dynamics were shaped by its role as a buffer zone against external powers, including the Mughals, Afghans, and Marathas. The Sikh *misls* capitalized on local discontent with Mughal taxation and Afghan plundering to rally support for their cause. For instance, during Ahmad Shah Abdali's invasions (1747–1761), the Sikhs mobilized Haryana's peasantry and local leaders to resist Afghan forces, particularly after the devastation caused by the Third Battle of Panipat.<sup>18</sup> The Sikhs' ability to present themselves as protectors of local interests against foreign invaders enhanced their legitimacy in Haryana. Simultaneously, the *misls* countered Maratha ambitions in the region by asserting control over key territories, ensuring that Haryana remained a Sikh stronghold. This resistance to external powers solidified Haryana's role as a critical component of the Sikh state's defensive and offensive strategies.

### Challenges in Socio-Political Integration

Despite these contributions, the Sikh *misls* faced challenges in fully integrating Haryana's diverse communities.<sup>19</sup> Internal rivalries among the *misls* occasionally led to competition for control over Haryana's resources, undermining unified governance. Additionally, the region's Muslim population, particularly in areas under Mughal influence, sometimes resisted Sikh rule, creating tensions that required delicate negotiation. The Sikhs' emphasis on Khalsa identity also posed challenges in aligning with non-Sikh communities, necessitating pragmatic alliances to maintain stability. Nevertheless, the *misls*' ability to balance coercion and cooperation allowed them to establish a foothold in Haryana, paving the way for its deeper integration into the Sikh state by the late 18th century.<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

Haryana's role in the formation and consolidation of the Sikh state during the 18th century underscores the intricate interplay of geography, economy, and socio-political dynamics in shaping early modern Indian polities. As a strategic corridor bridging the Sikh heartland of Punjab with the Mughal capital of Delhi, Haryana provided the Sikh *misls* with a critical platform for military campaigns, exemplified by their raids and the pivotal Battle of Panipat (1761). The region's fertile agrarian base and control over trade routes, such as the Grand Trunk Road, sustained Sikh armies and enriched their coffers through the rakhi tribute system, ensuring economic resilience amid persistent conflicts. Socio-politically, Haryana's



diverse communities—Jats, Rajputs, and others—offered alliances and recruitment opportunities, while the spread of Sikhism through gurdwaras fostered cultural integration, reinforcing the Sikh state's ideological foundation. Despite challenges, such as internal misl rivalries and tensions with non-Sikh populations, Haryana's integration into the Sikh Confederacy transformed it from a contested frontier into a vital stronghold. This multifaceted contribution not only bolstered the Sikh state's emergence as a regional power but also laid the groundwork for its unification under Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the early 19th century. Haryana's significance thus illuminates the broader historical processes of state-building in 18th-century India, where regional dynamics were as critical as central leadership in forging enduring political entities. By examining Haryana's role, this study reaffirms the importance of localized perspectives in understanding the rise of the Sikh state and its lasting impact on Indian history.

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