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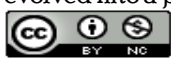


COLONIAL CONQUEST AND THE FORT OF MULTAN: MILITARY STRATEGY, SIEGE WARFARE, AND IMPERIAL EXPANSION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY PUNJAB

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Multan, Siege Warfare, Military Strategy, British Empire, Sikh Rule, Frontier Warfare, Colonial Expansion	Military strategy provides critical insights into the dynamics of power, conflict and state formation. This study examines the political and military campaign in Multan during the British annexation of Punjab in 1849, focusing on the conflict between Diwan Mulraj and representatives of the British East India Company, particularly Herbert Edwardes. Multan's geo-strategic significance as a trade and military hub connecting Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent made it a focal point of imperial contestations. This article reinterprets the annexation of Multan (1848–1849) through a military history framework, focusing on strategy, siege warfare, and operational dynamics. Moving beyond conventional narratives of inevitable British victory, the study examines how the fortifications of Multan, the tactical decisions of Diwan Mulraj, and the operational planning of British commanders shaped the course of the conflict as well as History. Drawing on colonial military records, political diaries, and settlement reports, the paper argues that the conquest of Multan was not merely a product of superior firepower but the outcome of coordinated siege tactics, logistical control, and the strategic mobilization of local alliances. By situating the siege within the broader context of imperial frontier policy and regional instability, the study highlights the interaction between military operations and political strategy. The article contributes to military historiography by demonstrating how siege warfare and indigenous responses influenced the consolidation of British rule in Punjab. Drawing upon primary archival sources, including unpublished official reports from the British Indian Library, this research explores how a commercial entity evolved into a political and military power.
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Introduction

The decline of the Mughal Empire in the eighteenth century created a political vacuum in the Indian subcontinent, raising the question of who would consolidate power. The British East India Company, initially a commercial enterprise, gradually emerged as a dominant political force following its victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757 (Marshall, 2005). By the early nineteenth century, British expansionist ambitions were shaped by geopolitical concerns, particularly the perceived threat of Russian expansion in Central Asia. Punjab, under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, remained a strong and independent state until his death in 1839. Subsequent political instability created a for British intervention, culminating in the annexation of Punjab in 1849 (Talbot, 2016). Multan occupied a crucial position in this transformation due to its strategic location linking trade routes between Central Asia, Afghanistan,(Durani,1991) and India. This study focuses on the political dynamics in Multan and the resistance led by Diwan Mulraj against British intervention. Mulraj was soon undeceived about the aim of the *feringies*. Wazir Lal Sing,an enemy of Mulraj, used the Darbars claims as a pretext for dispatching troops against Multan.(Chopra,100)

The siege and conquest of Multan (1848–1849)(Roseberry,1988) represent one of the most significant military engagements in the British annexation of Punjab. While previous studies have largely interpreted the fall of Multan in terms of political decline or administrative weakness, insufficient attention has been paid to the military dimensions (Edwards,1847) of the conflict, particularly the strategic importance of the fort, the nature of siege warfare, and the operational conduct of both defending and attacking forces.

This study reframes the annexation as a military problem, focusing on three central questions:

1. How did the fortifications of Multan shape the conduct of the siege?
2. What strategies were employed by both Diwan Mulraj and British commanders?
3. To what extent did logistics, alliances, and battlefield decisions determine the outcome?

By addressing these questions, the paper situates the conquest of Multan within the broader tradition of nineteenth-century siege warfare and imperial military expansion. The siege and conquest of Multan (1848–1849) represent one of the most significant military engagements in the British annexation of Punjab. While previous studies have largely interpreted the fall of Multan in terms of political decline or administrative weakness, insufficient attention has been paid to the military dimensions of the conflict, particularly the strategic importance of the fort, the nature of siege warfare, and the operational conduct of both defending and attacking forces.

Historiography and Military Context

Military histories (Edwards, 1847) of British expansion in India have often emphasized decisive battles and technological superiority. However, recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of siege warfare, (Edwards.1849) frontier strategy, and hybrid conflict, where conventional military engagements intersected with political negotiation and local alliances. In the context of Punjab,(Latif, 1964) the annexation campaigns have been described as rapid and

decisive. Yet, the siege of Multan (Dunlop, 2002) The fort of Multan, (Kohli, 1849) with its strong defensive architecture and strategic location, transformed the conflict into a protracted military campaign rather than a swift conquest

Methodology

This study adopts a military-historical methodology grounded in qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources relating to the Siege of Multan (1848–1849). The research draws extensively upon archival materials, including military dispatches, campaign correspondence, political diaries of British officers, administrative records, gazetteers, and contemporary reports produced during the Second Anglo-Sikh War. These sources are examined critically to reconstruct the operational environment, strategic decision-making and tactical dimensions of the conflict.

The analytical framework focuses on three interconnected dimensions of warfare. First, it examines operational strategy, including troop deployment, command structures; siege planning, and communication networks employed by both the British East India Company and the forces of Diwan Mulraj. Second, the study analyzes tactical engagements, particularly the use of artillery, defensive fortifications, infantry assaults, and urban combat within the fortified city of Multan. Third, it evaluates the role of logistics, regional alliances, and force sustainability in shaping the outcome of the campaign.

The study further employs a comparative military perspective to assess the asymmetrical nature of the conflict. Particular attention is given to the contrast between British siege warfare doctrine characterized by organized artillery deployment, disciplined infantry coordination, and logistical superiority and Mulraj's defensive strategy, which relied upon fortified resistance, regional support networks, and localized military adaptation. Through this approach, the article situates the Siege of Multan within the broader evolution of nineteenth-century colonial warfare in South Asia.

The Strategic Importance of Multan Fort

City of Multan in 1848



Source: British Indian Library London

The fort's design (Multan Record, 1852) made it particularly resistant to direct assault, necessitating a siege-based approach by attacking forces. Control of Multan also held strategic value for the British, as it secured access to frontier regions and safeguarded imperial interests against perceived external threats.

The Fort of Multan occupied a position of immense strategic significance in southern Punjab during the mid-nineteenth century. Located near the major river systems of the Chenab and Indus, the fort served not only as a military stronghold but also as a vital administrative and logistical center controlling communication routes across southern Punjab and frontier regions. Its geographical location enabled the authority controlling Multan to monitor trade corridors, troop movements, and regional political networks.

The defensive architecture of the fort further enhanced its military value. Contemporary records describe Multan Fort as possessing massive defensive walls, fortified gates, elevated ramparts, and strategically positioned artillery emplacements designed to withstand prolonged assault (Multan Record, 1852). The fort's structural resilience made direct military penetration exceptionally difficult, compelling attacking forces to adopt a methodical siege strategy rather than relying upon rapid assault tactics.

For the British East India Company, control of Multan carried broader geopolitical significance. The capture of the city was essential for consolidating imperial authority in Punjab following increasing instability after the decline of Sikh political power. British officials also viewed Multan as a critical gateway to frontier territories, the control of which was necessary to secure imperial communication lines and contain perceived external threats emerging from northwestern approaches. Consequently, the siege assumed importance far beyond a localized rebellion, becoming part of a larger imperial strategy aimed at strengthening colonial dominance in the region.

Defensive Strategy of Diwan Mulraj

Diwan Mulraj's military strategy was shaped by both structural constraints and tactical considerations. Recognizing the limitations of confronting British forces in open battle, he adopted a defensive posture centered on fortification and endurance. Mulraj also attempted to frame the conflict in ideological terms, invoking religious and regional sentiments to sustain resistance. His strategy reflects an understanding of asymmetric warfare, where defensive strength and local knowledge were used to offset the advantages of a technologically superior opponent.

British Operational Strategy and Campaign Planning

British strategy in Multan combined conventional military tactics with adaptive operational planning. The campaign evolved through several phases: Early operations under Lieutenant Herbert Edwards relied on rapid mobilization and local alliances to contain the rebellion of Multan District. However, these forces lacked the capacity for a decisive assault on the fortified

city. With the arrival of reinforcements under General Whish, the British shifted to a formal siege strategy, Artillery played a decisive role in weakening the fort's defenses. Sustained bombardment created breaches in the walls, enabling infantry advances. The eventual capture of Multan involved coordinated attacks on weakened sections of the fortifications, supported by continuous artillery fire. This phased approach demonstrates the British reliance on systematic siege warfare rather than rapid conquest.

Logistics, Alliances, and Force Multipliers

A critical factor in the success of British operations was their ability to maintain logistical superiority. Key elements included: Secure supply lines for ammunition and provisions, coordination with allied forces, including regional chiefs as local alliances and force multipliers. Broadfoot was serving as a political agent for the North West Frontier at that. He offered to Nizam-ul-Mulk to move military troops from Lahore to Multan later in March 1845. Broadfoot was in regular communication with the Diwan from the times of War. He assured the Commander in the Northern Sindh that Multan troops would defend Sindh from threats emanating from Lahore. He has also "succeeded for satisfying the Governor from his commitment to Sikh Darbar." (Duraani, 1991)

Herbert Edwards arrived in Kaneri a *tehsil* of Shujababad, located on the left Bank of the river Chenab, on 17th June 1848, to launch a battle against Nizam-ul-Mulk as per the orders of colonial government. Nizam-ul-Mulk also dispatched a well-equipped troop of seven thousand soldiers under the Command of Ram Rang, with ten guns. Since that time he had not received any assistance from Lahore Durbar. The Nawab of Bahawalpur, the Pathans and Baluch Chief of different tribes were active collaborators of Edwards. They stood by him at his call for help. Edwards had ten thousands armed persons, five thousands from different Muslim tribes and five thousands from General Courtland active collaborated. The large Army consisting of more than ten thousands soldiers fought against the soldiers defending Multan on June 18. (Sita Ram, 1971) In contrast, Nizam-ul-Mulk faced increasing difficulties in sustaining supplies and maintaining cohesion among his forces, highlighting the importance of logistics in siege warfare.

The Dynamics of Siege Warfare

The siege of Multan illustrates several defining characteristics of nineteenth-century siege warfare, in which technological superiority, logistical endurance, engineering, and the progressive reduction of fortified resistance shaped the outcome of military operations. The British siege force was progressively reinforced, and the arrival of substantial artillery and additional troops transformed the balance of the campaign. By the final phase, British forces possessed a large siege train, including heavy guns and mortars, which were employed systematically against Multan's defensive works (Cunningham, 1853; Edwards, 1851; National Army Museum, n.d.).

First, the siege was fundamentally an attrition-based conflict. Time increasingly favored the besieging force because the British were able to reinforce their troops, maintain supply arrangements, and sustain continuous military pressure, whereas the defenders faced diminishing resources and mounting casualties. The initial British siege was itself interrupted following the

defection of Sher Singh's forces in September 1848, demonstrating that military endurance and the availability of reinforcements were critical determinants of siege warfare. When British reinforcements and supplies arrived later in the year, the siege was resumed with considerably greater force (Edwardes, 1851; National Army Museum, n.d.). The prolonged engagement consequently transformed the siege into a contest of endurance in which the capacity to sustain operations became as important as battlefield courage.

Second, artillery played a decisive role in determining the pace and eventual outcome of the operations. British siege batteries were progressively established closer to the city's defensive walls, while heavy guns and mortars were used to create breaches and weaken the fortifications. The employment of approximately 150 artillery pieces during the renewed siege illustrates the growing importance of concentrated firepower in nineteenth-century siege operations (Cunningham, 1853; National Army Museum, n.d.). The systematic bombardment demonstrated that traditional defensive architecture, although capable of delaying an attacking army, was increasingly vulnerable to sustained artillery fire and military engineering.

Third, the siege involved an important dimension of urban and close-quarters combat. Following the breaching of the city's defenses, British troops entered Multan and encountered resistance within the urban and fortified environment. The fighting subsequently extended from the outer defenses into the city itself, while the citadel continued to resist after the fall of the city. The final stages therefore combined artillery bombardment, engineering operations, assault, and close-quarters fighting (Edwardes, 1851; Latif, 1889/1964).

The prolonged nature of the siege consequently imposed considerable military, logistical, and psychological pressure on the opposing forces. Nevertheless, the British ability to sustain a prolonged campaign, concentrate superior artillery, maintain logistical support, and progressively reduce the defensive capacity of Multan ultimately proved decisive. The siege therefore demonstrates that nineteenth-century siege warfare was not determined by artillery alone; rather, firepower, logistics, endurance, engineering, reinforcement, and the ability to sustain operational pressure worked together to determine the outcome. In this respect, Multan provides a significant case study of the increasingly systematic and technologically driven character of nineteenth-century siege operations (Cunningham, 1853; Edwardes, 1851; National Army Museum, n.d.).

Socio-Economic and Political Factors

The conflict at Multan cannot be understood solely in military terms; it was also shaped by the socio-economic and political transformations accompanying the expansion of British authority in the region. British attempts to reorganize revenue administration and strengthen fiscal control disrupted established patterns of political authority and revenue collection. The controversy surrounding Mulraj's position as governor and the British attempt to alter the existing administrative arrangement contributed to the political crisis that preceded the siege (Edwardes, 1851; Latif, 1889/1964).

These developments weakened the institutional position of Diwan Mulraj and contributed to tensions among sections of the local administrative and political elite. The crisis surrounding the transfer of revenue administration therefore developed within a wider context of political uncertainty and resistance to the restructuring of established relationships between the state, local intermediaries, and regional society (Cunningham, 1853; Latif, 1889/1964).

Religious and communal considerations also intersected with these political and economic interests. However, the evidence does not support treating the conflict as a straightforward Hindu–Muslim division. Different sections of Multan's population responded to the crisis according to their political affiliations, economic interests, local relationships, and expectations concerning the emerging political order. Later historical accounts indicate that the resistance surrounding Mulraj included Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims, while British political strategy also sought to mobilize particular groups against Mulraj (Gandhi, 2013; Latif, 1889/1964). Consequently, communal identity was one factor within a more complex configuration of political and socio-economic interests rather than the sole determinant of allegiance.

Consequently, the British advantage at Multan was shaped not only by military superiority but also by the fragmentation of local political support. The inability to maintain a consistently unified political coalition weakened the broader resistance to British intervention. At the same time, the prolonged defense of Multan demonstrates that political fragmentation did not eliminate local resistance. Socio-economic grievances, competing elite interests, changing political loyalties, and military developments interacted throughout the conflict, creating conditions in which the British could eventually sustain the siege and overcome the defensive

Multan under Sikh Rule and British Intervention

The siege therefore demonstrates how military outcomes in nineteenth-century South Asia were closely connected to the political economy and social structure of the territories in which warfare occurred. The case of Multan suggests that military capability must be examined alongside local political authority, economic interests, administrative structures, and patterns of social allegiance. Following the assassination of Sawan Mal, his son Diwan Mulraj was appointed governor of Multan in 1844. His administration coincided with increasing British interference in Punjab's internal affairs (Durrani, 1991). The East India Company, motivated by both strategic and economic interests, sought to control Multan as a gateway to southern Punjab. British officials, including Henry Lawrence and John Lawrence, exerted pressure on Mulraj through administrative and fiscal reforms, particularly in taxation and customs duties. Mulraj did not satisfied with their intervention to his tax collection policy. Mulraj resisted these interventions, viewing them as infringements on local autonomy. His resignation in 1847, followed by escalating tensions, set the stage for open conflict.

Conflict Between Mulraj and the East India Company

The confrontation intensified in 1848 when Herbert Edwardes launched military operations against Mulraj. The conflict was not merely military but also political, involving alliances with local tribes, including Pathans and Baloch chiefs (Edwardes, 1849/1964). Despite limited

resources, Mulraj mounted significant resistance. His forces demonstrated considerable resilience in battles such as Kaneri and Saddu Sam. However, British military superiority, combined with local divisions, ultimately led to Mulraj's defeat. The murder of British officers Patrick Vans Agnew and William Anderson in April 1848 marked a turning point, transforming the conflict into a full-scale rebellion and triggering the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848-1849).

The Siege of Multan and the Revision of Existing Historiography

The siege of Multan developed into one of the most significant military operations of the Second Anglo-Sikh War. British and allied forces gradually concentrated substantial military resources against the city, supported by artillery and a systematic siege operation. The initial British siege was interrupted in September 1848 when Sher Singh's forces defected, compelling General Whish to withdraw. The siege was subsequently resumed after British reinforcements and supplies arrived in November, including a substantial siege train (Edwardes, 1851; National Army Museum, n.d.).

Despite the numerical and technological superiority eventually available to the British, the defenders mounted sustained resistance from within the fortified city. Multan's defensive system, together with the determination of Mulraj and his supporters, enabled the city and citadel to withstand prolonged British military pressure. The city was captured in January 1849, while the citadel continued to resist until Mulraj surrendered on 22 January 1849 (Cunningham, 1853; Edwardes, 1851; Latif, 1889/1964).

The significance of Multan, however, extends beyond the immediate military outcome. Earlier historiography of Punjab has sometimes conveyed an impression that resistance to British expansion was limited, fragmented, or insufficiently organized. The evidence examined in this study complicates this interpretation. Although the British possessed important advantages in military organization, artillery, manpower, engineering, and logistical capacity, the defenders of Multan demonstrated considerable determination and employed the city's fortified environment to prolong resistance (Cunningham, 1853; Edwardes, 1851).

The siege was therefore not simply an uncomplicated episode of British military expansion; it represented a sustained contest between a technologically and logistically superior imperial force and a local administration determined to defend its political authority and territory. The temporary withdrawal of the British besieging force in September 1848 following Sher Singh's defection further demonstrates that British military superiority was not automatically decisive at every stage of the campaign (Edwardes, 1851; National Army Museum, n.d.).

The case of Multan further demonstrates that military resistance cannot be separated from the region's broader socio-economic, political, and cultural development. The city's strategic importance, administrative institutions, commercial networks, landed interests, and established political structures shaped both the capacity and motivations for resistance. Consequently, the military history of Multan cannot be adequately reconstructed through battlefield events alone. Local history provides essential context for understanding why Multan resisted, how its defensive

system functioned, and why its capture was strategically significant (Gandhi, 2013; Latif, 1889/1964).

This study therefore argues for a more integrated approach to the military history of nineteenth-century Punjab—one that places military operations within their local political, socio-economic, and institutional contexts. Multan's experience demonstrates that British conquest was not merely the result of an absence of indigenous resistance; rather, it emerged through the interaction of sustained local resistance with British advantages in military technology, organization, logistics, engineering, and operational capacity. A closer examination of Multan consequently enriches the broader historiography of the Second Anglo-Sikh War and challenges interpretations that understate the complexity and persistence of local resistance to British expansion.

Conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of Multan's military and political history is therefore essential for a nuanced understanding of Punjab's colonial transition. The conquest of Multan was not a simple demonstration of military superiority but a complex military campaign shaped by strategy, logistics, and siege warfare dynamics. The fort's defensive strength, Mulraj's resistance, and the phased British approach transformed the conflict into a prolonged and demanding operation. This study highlights the importance of integrating military analysis into broader historical interpretations of colonial expansion. By focusing on operational and tactical dimensions, it demonstrates that imperial conquest was contingent upon adaptation, coordination, and sustained military effort. The siege of Multan thus stands as a critical case in understanding the role of fortified warfare in the expansion of the British Empire in South Asia. This study challenges the conventional narrative that Punjab offered minimal resistance to British expansion. The case of Multan demonstrates that local actively resisted colonial encroachment despite structural disadvantages. The conflict between Mulraj and the East India Company highlights the transformation of a commercial enterprise into a political, driven by strategic and economic interests, Mulraj more sinned than sinning. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of regional histories in understanding broader imperial processes.

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