



The princely state of Jind during the Second World War: Military contribution, political loyalty and the experience of war, 1939–1945

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Abstract

The Second World War (1939–1945) transformed the political, military and economic landscape of the Indian subcontinent. Although British India provided the largest share of manpower for the Allied war effort, the contribution of the Indian princely states was also considerable. Among the princely states of the Punjab, Jind occupied an important position within the system of Indian States Forces. Ruled by Maharaja Sir Ranbir Singh, Jind had a long tradition of military cooperation with the British Empire, dating from the nineteenth century and extending through the First World War. During the Second World War this relationship acquired a new significance as the forces of the Indian princely states were incorporated into the wider Allied military effort.

This article examines the contribution of the Princely State of Jind during the Second World War, with particular attention to the Jind Infantry, its deployment in Malaya and Singapore, and the experiences of its soldiers during the Japanese invasion of 1941–42. The Jind Infantry formed part of the Indian States Forces and was employed in the defence of important airfields and positions in Singapore and Malaya. In February 1942, Jind troops participated in the desperate defence of Singapore against the Japanese advance. Following the fall of Singapore, many members of the unit became prisoners of war. Lieutenant-Colonel Gurbakhsh Singh, associated with the Jind Infantry, became particularly notable for maintaining the cohesion of his men and resisting Japanese efforts to persuade Indian prisoners to join the Indian National Army.

The article also places Jind's contribution within the wider institutional history of the Indian States Forces. It argues that Jind's contribution cannot be measured simply in terms of numbers of soldiers. Its significance lay in the deployment of a princely-state force overseas, the sacrifices of its soldiers in the Malayan campaign and captivity, and the political expression of loyalty by the Jind State to the British war effort. At the same time, the article considers the limitations of this loyalty, particularly in the context of the growing Indian nationalist movement and the changing relationship between the princely states, the British Crown and the Indian people. The study concludes that Jind's wartime experience demonstrates the complex position of the Punjab princely states during the final decade of British rule: they were simultaneously military partners of the British Empire, autonomous political entities, and institutions increasingly confronted by the forces of Indian nationalism and decolonisation.

Keywords: Jind State, Maharaja Ranbir Singh, Second World War, Indian States Forces, Jind Infantry, Malaya Campaign, Singapore, Indian princely states, Punjab, Indian soldiers, prisoners of war

Introduction

The history of India's participation in the Second World War has generally been written around the British Indian Army, the Indian National Army, the political activities of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, and the economic mobilisation of British India. The contribution of the princely states has received considerably less attention. This is particularly true of smaller states such as Jind, whose military participation has often disappeared within broader accounts of the Indian States Forces.

The Princely State of Jind was one of the important Phulkian states of the Punjab. Its ruling dynasty had established a long relationship with the British after the Cis-Sutlej states entered into subsidiary arrangements with the East India Company in the early nineteenth century. Jind's rulers subsequently developed a reputation for loyalty to the British Crown. The state's forces participated in campaigns including the Tirah expedition of 1897 and the First World War. The official history of Jind records that during the First World War the Jind Imperial Service Regiment served for approximately three and a half years in East Africa, while the state made substantial financial contributions to the British war effort. Jind District+1

This earlier military relationship is essential for understanding Jind during the Second World War. The state entered the war with an established military tradition, a recognised state force and an institutional relationship with the Indian Army. By the late 1930s the old Imperial Service Troops system had evolved into the Indian States Forces (ISF). Jind's forces consequently formed part of a broader military organisation through which the princely states contributed troops to the defence of the British Empire. The Second World War, however, was different from the First. Japan's entry into the conflict brought the war directly into South and Southeast Asia. The fall of Malaya and Singapore in 1942 exposed Indian troops to a new form of warfare and resulted in the capture of tens of thousands of Allied personnel. For the Jind Infantry, the Malayan campaign became the central episode of its wartime history.

The evidence available for Jind is uneven. The British Library catalogue records a Jind Administration Report for 1943/44–1944/45, demonstrating that wartime administrative records survive, although they are not all readily available in digitised form. Consequently, the military contribution is considerably better documented than the precise financial contribution of Jind during 1939–45. This distinction is important because figures frequently

quoted for Jind's war contributions—such as more than Rs. 24 lakh in war gifts and Rs. 11½ lakh in loans—belong to the First World War, not the Second.

Jind State and Maharaja Ranbir Singh

The Second World War occurred during the long reign of Maharaja Sir Ranbir Singh, who had succeeded to the Jind throne in 1887 as a child and received full ruling powers in 1899. His reign extended for more than six decades and therefore encompassed the transformation of the British Indian political system from nineteenth-century imperial expansion to the transfer of power in 1947–48.

Ranbir Singh inherited a state whose political position was closely connected to the British imperial system. Jind had supported the British during earlier military crises, and the state's forces were progressively integrated into imperial defence arrangements. The military background of the ruler himself also reinforced this relationship. By the twentieth century, the Jind ruler had accumulated a series of honours and military associations that reflected his position among the senior princes of the Punjab.

The development of the Indian States Forces after the First World War was particularly important. The Imperial Service Troops scheme had been created in the late nineteenth century to enable princely-state armies to achieve a degree of standardisation and to cooperate with the British Indian Army. Following the First World War, the system was reorganised. The term "Imperial Service Troops" was replaced by "Indian States Forces," with the new arrangement formally announced in 1922. According to military historian A. N. McClenaghan, the reorganisation eventually provided substantial support to the Allied war effort during the Second World War. Jind was included in the Punjab circle of the Indian States Forces. A 1938 discussion of the organisation of the State Forces identifies Jind alongside Patiala, Nabha, Kashmir, Kapurthala and other Punjab states and notes that the Punjab circle contained thirty-three state military units. Thus, when the Second World War began in September 1939, Jind was not an isolated local military power. It was part of an established system of princely-state military forces supervised and coordinated with the wider Indian military establishment.

Outbreak of the Second World War and the Indian States Forces

Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939. India was automatically committed to the war because constitutional authority remained with the British Crown. The decision generated intense political controversy in British India, especially because Indian political leaders had not been consulted. The princely states occupied a different constitutional position. Their rulers were bound by treaties and subsidiary relationships with the British Crown, and many princes responded by declaring their support for Britain. The military forces of the states therefore became an important component of imperial defence. The contribution of the princely states should not be understood merely as a ceremonial expression of loyalty. During the Second World War, units belonging to the Indian States Forces served in several theatres, including the Middle East, North Africa, Burma, Malaya, Singapore and Italy. The wider system eventually involved many thousands of personnel.

The Jind State Forces were among these formations. A contemporary British order of battle from the beginning of the war lists Jind Bodyguard Cavalry, Jind Infantry and Jind (2nd Line) Infantry among the Jind State Forces. General Staff demonstrates that Jind possessed a structured military establishment rather than merely a small ceremonial guard. The organisation also illustrates an important feature of princely-state military participation. State forces were not simply absorbed wholesale into the British Indian Army. They retained their state identity while operating within the broader imperial military framework. Their soldiers could therefore fight in distant theatres while continuing to be identified with their princely state. For Jind, this identity became especially significant in the Far Eastern campaign.

The Jind Infantry and the Malayan Campaign

Japan's entry into the war in December 1941 fundamentally altered the military situation in Asia. Japanese forces rapidly advanced through Malaya and threatened Singapore, the principal British military base in Southeast Asia. The Jind Infantry was among the Indian States Forces units deployed in the Singapore and Malaya area. A British order of battle dated 7 December 1941 lists the Jind Infantry, Indian States Forces, alongside the Kapurthala Infantry under the air-defence arrangements of Singapore General Staff. The Jind Infantry was associated particularly with the defence of airfields and important military positions. Sources concerning the campaign place the battalion in the Tengah area of Singapore. Its deployment demonstrates the practical nature of the State Forces' contribution: these troops were not merely held in reserve for ceremonial duties but were placed in areas of genuine operational importance.

The Japanese advance was exceptionally rapid. British and Commonwealth forces suffered from weaknesses in air power, intelligence, communications, equipment and strategic preparation. The retreat through the Malay Peninsula eventually brought the Allied forces into Singapore, where they attempted to establish a final defensive position. The Jind Infantry subsequently became involved in the fighting surrounding the Japanese assault on Singapore.

Jind Infantry at the Battle of Singapore

The Japanese assault on Singapore began on 8 February 1942. Japanese troops crossed from the Malay Peninsula onto Singapore Island, launching their principal attack in the northwestern sector. The Jind Infantry was involved in the defence of this sector. Accounts of the Battle of Sarimbun Beach identify the Jind Infantry Battalion of the Indian States Forces among the Allied forces involved in the defence. The battalion was associated with the defence of the Tengah area and operated alongside Australian and other Allied formations. The fighting demonstrated the extremely difficult circumstances facing the Allied defenders. Japanese forces enjoyed numerical and tactical advantages at crucial points and rapidly established bridgeheads. Allied communications became increasingly disorganised, and the defensive perimeter progressively contracted.

The participation of the Jind Infantry in the Singapore campaign is significant for two reasons. First, it represents the overseas deployment of a relatively small Punjab princely-state force in one of the most consequential battles of the Asian theatre. The soldiers of Jind were fighting thousands of kilometres away from their state, under

operational conditions very different from those anticipated when many state forces had originally been created. Second, the Singapore campaign transformed the meaning of military service for the Jind troops. Instead of returning to India after a short overseas deployment, many became prisoners of war following the surrender of Allied forces on 15 February 1942. The fall of Singapore was one of Britain's greatest military defeats. For Indian soldiers, it also created a complex political and psychological environment because Japanese authorities sought to use Indian prisoners in support of the Indian National Army.

Prisoners of War and Lieutenant-Colonel Gurbakhsh Singh

One of the most important individuals associated with the Jind Infantry during the Second World War was Lieutenant-Colonel Gurbakhsh Singh. Gurbakhsh Singh commanded the Jind Infantry during the Singapore campaign. Following the surrender, he and his men became prisoners of the Japanese. His later memoirs, *Indelible Reminiscences*, provide an important Indian perspective on the experience of captivity. The memoir is described as an account of his command of the Jind Infantry at the time of the British surrender in Singapore and of his subsequent captivity. The captivity of the Jind soldiers lasted for several years. Japanese authorities attempted to persuade Indian prisoners to join the Indian National Army (INA), which was being organised under Japanese sponsorship as a force intended to fight against British rule in India.

This created an extraordinarily complicated situation for Indian soldiers. They were colonial subjects serving under a British imperial military structure, yet they were also confronted by the argument that joining the INA could transform them from prisoners into soldiers fighting for Indian independence.

Gurbakhsh Singh is particularly remembered for resisting these efforts and maintaining the cohesion of his battalion. Accounts of his wartime career state that he refused to join the INA and encouraged his soldiers to remain together rather than defect. He subsequently returned to India with members of his battalion after the Japanese surrender. The British authorities later recognised his conduct during captivity. He received the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for his wartime service. Military histories of the Indian States Forces specifically identify his conduct as an example of resistance to Japanese attempts to influence captured state-force personnel. The story of Gurbakhsh Singh is therefore more than an individual military biography. It illustrates one of the central dilemmas of the Indian soldier during the Second World War: loyalty to his existing military oath existed alongside the rapidly expanding idea of Indian national independence.

The Political Meaning of Jind's Military Contribution

Jind's participation in the war cannot be separated from the political structure of the princely states. The rulers of the princely states were not elected representatives. Their authority rested upon dynastic legitimacy and treaties with the British Crown. Their support for the British war effort consequently served several purposes.

First, military assistance demonstrated loyalty to the imperial relationship. The princes could present themselves as reliable partners of the British government. Second,

participation allowed rulers to maintain or strengthen their political standing within the hierarchy of Indian princes. Military service and imperial honours had long played an important role in relations between the British government and princely rulers. Third, the war provided the princely states with an opportunity to demonstrate their usefulness in a changing political environment. By the 1930s and 1940s, the future of British rule was increasingly uncertain. Supporting the imperial war effort could be seen by rulers as a means of preserving political influence.

Jind's position reflected this wider pattern. Its earlier record during the First World War had already established its reputation for loyalty. During that conflict, Jind placed substantial resources at the disposal of the British government and, its Imperial Service Regiment served in East Africa for approximately three and a half years. It would therefore be misleading to regard the Second World War contribution as an isolated event. Rather, it was the continuation of a political-military relationship that had developed over several generations.

Military Contribution versus Financial Contribution

A distinction must be made between Jind's documented military contribution during the Second World War and claims concerning financial contributions. The Jind District Gazetteer records that during the First World War, the state contributed more than Rs. 24 lakh in war gifts and raised approximately Rs. 11½ lakh in loans. These figures are sometimes reproduced in general discussions of Jind's wartime history without clearly identifying the war to which they relate.

They should not be presented as Jind's Second World War contributions. For the period 1939–45, the surviving documentary evidence presently accessible online provides much clearer information about military deployment than about the precise value of Jind's financial contributions. The British Library catalogue confirms the existence of Jind's wartime administration reports for 1943/44–1944/45, which would be valuable primary sources for reconstructing the state's finances, recruitment, administration and wartime expenditure. This source limitation is historically important. It prevents a simplistic conclusion that Jind's contribution was either large or insignificant solely on the basis of financial statistics. Military contributions also involved the costs of recruitment, training, maintenance, equipment, pensions, family support and the social consequences of losing men to overseas service.

For a small princely state with a population of approximately 362,000 according to the 1941 Census, the overseas deployment of a state infantry battalion represented a significant mobilisation of human resources.

The Human Dimension of the War

The contribution of Jind should ultimately be understood through the experiences of its soldiers and their families. Military statistics can obscure the personal consequences of war. The men of the Jind Infantry left a princely state in northern India and found themselves fighting in the tropical environment of Malaya and Singapore. They confronted unfamiliar terrain, disease, air attacks, Japanese military pressure and eventually captivity. For those captured in Singapore, the war did not end in February 1942. Captivity continued for years. The physical hardships of prisoner-of-war camps were accompanied by psychological pressure and political uncertainty.

The Japanese effort to recruit Indian prisoners into the INA made captivity particularly complicated. Indian prisoners had to make decisions about loyalty, survival and political identity under conditions of extreme coercion. The example of the Jind Infantry demonstrates that Indian prisoners did not respond uniformly to the INA. Some joined, some resisted and others remained caught between competing forms of loyalty.

Gurbakhsh Singh's leadership became significant precisely because he attempted to maintain the identity and cohesion of his unit. His memoirs are therefore valuable not only for military history but also for the social history of Indian prisoners of war. The experience also shows that the history of Jind's contribution cannot be reduced to the policies of Maharaja Ranbir Singh. The actual burden of military service fell upon ordinary soldiers and their families.

Jind in the Wider Punjab Context

Jind's experience was part of a much larger pattern in the Punjab. The Punjab was one of the most important recruiting regions for the British Indian military system. Alongside British Indian Army units, the princely states of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Kapurthala and others supplied state forces.

The Punjab's princely states therefore, occupied a distinctive position. Their rulers possessed political autonomy within the limits imposed by British paramountcy, while their populations participated in the military economy of the wider empire.

Jind was smaller than Patiala, but its military contribution was proportionately important. The presence of Jind troops in Singapore demonstrates how even relatively small princely states were incorporated into global imperial warfare. The Indian States Forces as a whole served in theatres ranging from North Africa and the Middle East to Burma, Malaya and Italy. Peepul Tree Stories Jind's experience in Singapore consequently belongs to the global history of Indian military service during the Second World War. It also demonstrates the international character of the conflict. A soldier recruited in the Jind State could find himself stationed in Singapore, fighting Japanese troops whose advance formed part of a war extending across Europe, Africa and Asia.

Nationalism, Loyalty and the End of Empire

The greatest historical complexity of Jind's wartime contribution emerges from the political transformation taking place simultaneously within India. The Second World War accelerated the crisis of British rule. The Congress leadership opposed the manner in which India had been brought into the war, while the Quit India Movement of 1942 challenged British authority. The Indian National Army under Subhas Chandra Bose presented an alternative vision of Indian military service—one directed explicitly toward independence. The Jind Infantry therefore found itself at the intersection of two contradictory historical processes.

On the one hand, its soldiers were serving a princely state whose ruler remained loyal to the British Crown. On the other hand, they were Indians living through a period in which the legitimacy of British rule was increasingly challenged. The Japanese capture of Indian soldiers intensified this contradiction. The Japanese sought to exploit Indian nationalism, while British authorities attempted to

preserve the loyalty of Indian troops. The decisions made by prisoners such as Gurbakhsh Singh therefore had consequences beyond conventional military discipline.

The end of the war did not restore the old political order. Instead, it accelerated the transition toward independence. In 1947, the princely states had to confront the end of British paramountcy and determine their future relationship with the new Indian dominion. Jind ultimately became part of the political reorganisation of East Punjab after independence. The Jind State Forces were subsequently absorbed into the new military arrangements associated with the Patiala and East Punjab States Union.

Assessment of Jind's Contribution

The contribution of Jind during the Second World War can be assessed under four headings. First, military manpower. Jind maintained organised State Forces and supplied personnel for overseas service. The Jind Infantry was deployed to Southeast Asia, demonstrating that the state's military contribution had operational rather than merely ceremonial importance. Second, combat service. Jind troops participated in the defence of Singapore during the Japanese invasion. Their presence in the Singapore order of battle confirms their integration into the Allied defence system. Third, sacrifice and captivity. The fall of Singapore resulted in Jind soldiers becoming prisoners of war. Their captivity extended the personal cost of military service well beyond the battlefield. Fourth, political significance. Jind's military participation represented the continuation of the state's long-standing relationship with the British Empire. Yet the experiences of Jind soldiers during captivity also demonstrate the growing tension between imperial loyalty and Indian nationalism.

The most important conclusion is therefore that Jind's contribution should not be measured solely through financial donations or troop numbers. The available evidence suggests that the state's most clearly documented Second World War contribution was its military participation, particularly through the Jind Infantry in Malaya and Singapore.

Conclusion

The history of the Princely State of Jind during the Second World War occupies a small but significant place within the wider history of India and the British Empire. Jind entered the war with a long record of military cooperation with Britain. Its position within the Indian States Forces allowed its troops to participate in the global conflict far beyond the geographical boundaries of the Punjab.

The Jind Infantry's deployment to Malaya and Singapore was the most important manifestation of this contribution. In the Battle of Singapore, Jind troops faced the Japanese advance alongside other Allied formations. The surrender of Singapore transformed them from combatants into prisoners of war, exposing them to years of captivity and to Japanese attempts to recruit Indian prisoners into the Indian National Army.

The experience of Lieutenant-Colonel Gurbakhsh Singh is particularly significant. His determination to preserve the cohesion of his Jind battalion during captivity became an important example of military leadership under extreme circumstances. His later recognition with the DSO and OBE demonstrates the importance attached to his wartime conduct.

At the same time, Jind's contribution needs to be understood critically. The state's support for Britain reflected the constitutional and political position of the princely ruler rather than necessarily representing the political opinions of all of Jind's inhabitants. The soldiers themselves operated within a military hierarchy in which decisions about overseas deployment were made by the state and imperial authorities.

The Second World War therefore, reveals the contradictory nature of princely-state loyalty. The princes remained important partners of the British Empire, yet the war accelerated the political forces that eventually made that imperial relationship unsustainable. Jind's soldiers fought for an empire that was disappearing even as they fought to defend it. Jind's wartime history consequently deserves greater attention within the study of India's Second World War. It connects the local history of a Punjab princely state with the global history of the Malayan campaign, the fall of Singapore, Japanese captivity, the Indian States Forces and the emergence of competing ideas of Indian loyalty and nationalism. The story of Jind demonstrates that India's participation in the Second World War was not simply the story of British India versus the Axis powers; it was also a story of princely states, state armies, individual soldiers, political loyalties and the complicated transition from empire to independence.

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