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ISSN 2278-9529  
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Career with Swords: French Commanders in Sindhia's Army

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### Abstract:

After the defeat at the battle of Wandiwash, any possibility of French dominance in fragile Indian political scene reduced to minimal. But even after it, some French military adventurers rose to a higher military as well as political status and became the cause of envy and worry for British authorities. The period between 1784, during the Government of Warren Hastings, and 1808 during that of the Marquis Wellesley saw the rise, the reign, and the ruin of independent military adventurers in India. The most famous among them, General Count De Boigne and Monsieur Perron, were in the service of Maratha chief Sindhia during the last years of eighteenth century.

De Boigne faithfully served Sindhia and upheld the true interest of his master by insisting for peace with the East India Company. His last advice to his employer was to avoid conflict with the British. His efforts for the renovation of Taj Mahal are also noteworthy.

His successor Perron's position got even stronger. He assumed all the powers of administration and ruled the northern plains like a sovereign prince. The Mughal emperor was under his control as well as the most prosperous region of Doab. But Perron did not want to engage in war with company during 2<sup>nd</sup> Anglo-Maratha War. He planned for an escape way to Europe along with his accumulated wealth. He left his master at the time when Sindhia needed him the most.

This paper is an attempt to trace the role and rise of these French commanders. Later half of the paper closely looks into the negotiations between the Governor General Wellesley and Perron.

The ambition of France to play a dominant role in the Indian trade and political arena ceased with the defeat at the battle of Wandiwash.<sup>1</sup> Now the fragile Indian political scene was left open for any political power to shift the balance of power in their favour and the British East India company did the same and with precision. But even after Wandiwash, some French military adventurers rose to a higher military as well as political status and became the cause of envy and worry for British authorities. The period in which the European Military Adventurers of Hindustan flourished began in 1784, during the Government of Warren Hastings, and ended in 1808 during that of the Marquis Wellesley.<sup>2</sup> Those twenty years saw the rise, the reign, and the ruin of Independent Military Adventure in India. The most famous among them, General Count De Boigne and Perron, were in the service of Maratha chief Sindhia during the last years of eighteenth century. This paper is an attempt to trace their role and impact on Anglo-Maratha relations.

### **COUNT DE BOIGNE**

Count De Boigne was, certainly, one of the most prominent of a special breed of Europeans who 'went out to India' in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, some of them less to colonise than to seek adventures, and ended up at least half assimilated to the ways and worldviews of the subcontinent.<sup>3</sup>

The future General De Boigne was born Benoît Leborgne, in 1751. He saw the light of day in a very humble surrounding at Chambéry in Savoy on 24 March. His father was a fur merchant. Leborgne began his military career in the north of France in 1768, as an ordinary soldier in Louis XV's Irish Regiment.<sup>4</sup> Before reaching India he also served Russian army. De Boigne landed at Madras in 1778 and served for four years in a regiment of East India Company.<sup>5</sup> With the support of Warren Hastings in 1782 AD he planned for exploration of land route to Europe through Central Asia but later dropped the idea.<sup>6</sup>

In 1784, De Boigne found his place on India's politico-military chessboard and entered the service of Mahad ji Sindhia, leader of the Maratha and the most successful and prestigious Indian military commander of the time. Leborgne soon won his employer's confidence, had control over the Maratha troops confided to him, and after a run of victories against various rivals was promoted - in 1789, far away from that year's turbulence in France<sup>7</sup> and Europe - to the rank of general. In effect, he became Sindhia's right-hand-man. To De Boigne belongs the honour of having initiated the wonderful system that took root and grew with the rapidity.<sup>8</sup> He created for Mahadji Sindhia the first complete army of regular troops. The example was soon followed by the Nizam of Haidarabad, and, in a different degree, by Tipu Sultan. He was known for his efficiency and probity as a commander, and was renowned for always paying his troops on time. De Boigne was a brave soldier and good leader but was known for his great organisational

abilities. As a seasoned soldier with tactical experience De Boigne was a strong in the merits of light infantry troops and kept upgrading Sindhia's troops.<sup>9</sup> He organised and trained those infantry and artillery brigades which made his master Sindhia the paramount power of his time.<sup>10</sup>

In return for services rendered, the general from Chambéry found himself entrusted administrative responsibilities too. In 1791, Sindhia made him governor of the territory known as the Doab - symbolically important area in north-central India, relatively close to Delhi, which included as the jewel in its crown the historic city of Agra, famous then as now as the home of no less a monument than the Taj Mahal. 1794 witnessed a lively correspondence between de Boigne and John Murray, of the East India Company in Calcutta, concerning the possibilities of restoring the famous Mughal mausoleum and saving it for posterity.<sup>11</sup> Pressed by Murray, de Boigne asked Sindhia for funding. Sindhia remained lukewarm about investing in a monument. De Boigne, in his further remonstrance with his patron, proposed recouping the expenses by charging for entrance; and that money was to be used for its maintenance.<sup>12</sup> In a letter to Murray, he stressed the symbolic value which restoration would have for Hindu-Muslim inter communal relations. All in all, his attitude to the Taj seems remarkably advanced for his day, and de Boigne, beyond any doubt, helped start the process that led to its preservation.

In contrast to his official successor De Boigne faithfully served Sindhia and upheld the true interest of his master by insisting for peace with the East India Company. His last advice to his employer was to avoid conflict with the British and suggested to disband the battalions if they become the source of envy to company.<sup>13</sup> He maintained good relations with the representatives of Company and even, offered the services of cavalry to Sir John Shore at the time of mutiny of Bengal officers in 1795.<sup>14</sup> Grant Duff writes about him "De Boigne with much of military enterprise and enthusiasm, was at the same time a man of sense and prudence; a decided enemy to French revolutionary principles, and though friendly and kind to Frenchmen who sought his service, the ideas of conquest in India entertained by many of his nation who regarded, even at that period, as chimerical."<sup>15</sup>

Sindhia died that same year, and was succeeded by his nephew, a far less forceful individual. Two years later, in 1796, for health reasons, but also no doubt sensing that the Maratha star was on the wane, de Boigne decided to leave India for good. He had amassed a huge fortune in Sindhia's service. He had invested part of those monies in the indigo business. January 1797 saw the adventurer's return to Europe. Owing to the revolutionary instability in France, and given his own royalist and legitimist sympathies, he took up residence in London and later shifted to motherland Chambéry in Savoy. He successfully masterminded the return of his fortune: the 'Cronberg', a vessel loaded with his possessions and

trophies from India, sank off the coast of Denmark, but de Boigne sent divers who, miraculously, managed to rescue almost the entire cargo.

### **MONSIEUR PERRON**

Perron (1755–1834), who succeeded De Boigne as commander of European troops under Sindhia was also a French military adventurer, whose name was originally Pierre Cuillier, was born at Luceau in France, the son of a cloth merchant.

In 1780 he went out to India as a sailor on a French frigate deserted on the Malabar Coast, and made his way to upper India, where he enlisted in the Rana of Gohad's corps under a Scotsman named Sangster. In 1790 he took service under De Boigne, and was appointed to the command of his second brigade. He soon got promoted to the rank of second in command under De Boigne. De Boigne explained him “as a man of plain sense, of no talent, but a brave soldier.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1795 he assisted to win the battle of Kardla against the nizam of Hyderabad, and on De Boigne's retirement became commander-in-chief of Sindhia's army with all the powers and pomp of his predecessor. His position got even stronger because of long absence of Sindhia from north. He assumed all the powers of administration and ruled the northern plains like a sovereign prince. At the battle of Malpura (1800) he defeated the Rajput forces and received tributes from the chiefs of Jodhpur and Jaipur. He had monopoly over Salt tax and Customs duty. He got the royal privilege of minting coins and his annual salary reached approx £ 16,32, 000.<sup>17</sup>

Perron used his authority visibly without any attempt to hide, and that to over a region which was probably the best in the India. The politically symbolic and strategically important fort of Agra, capital town of Delhi and even the Mughal emperor was under his control as well as the most prosperous region of Doab. He had established various cantonments for twenty thousand soldiers in Doab and built nearly invincible fort at Aligarh.

Lord Wellesley, since his arrival in India in 1798 AD, was suspicious of the possible French attack on India, either by sea or land route.<sup>18</sup> Though today this seems sheer imagination only but contemporaries did not think so. The situation in India was also a catalyst in this scenario. Tipu Sultan of Mysore was trying to secure French military support to drive out English. He had sent ambassadors to Mauritius, the then French colony and even sent an embassy to Paris to meet the directors.<sup>19</sup> Nizam of Hyderabad had raised a trained infantry unit of 14000 men under a French national Monsieur Raymond.<sup>20</sup> Sikh king Ranjeet Singh was also raising army under French commanders and had Perron's influence in Panjab.<sup>21</sup> Holker also had a strong army unit under French

commanders. Perron under Sindhia was the most powerful and independent among them all. Wellesley has mentioned the 'Independent State' of Perron.<sup>22</sup>

Wellesley saw all these French units and commanders, especially to Perron, adverse to the interest of Company in India. "The Moghul has never been an important or dangerous instrument in the hands of the Mahrattas, but the augmentation of M. Perron's influence and power and the growth of a French interest in Hindostan, had given a new aspect to the condition of the Moghul, and that unfortunate Prince might here become a powerful aid to the cause of France in India, under the direction of French agents."<sup>23</sup>

However strong the position of Perron seems, it was evident in the very beginning of the second Maratha war that he did not want to engage in war with company. He was searching for an escape way to Europe along with his accumulated wealth.<sup>24</sup> Governor General had already guessed this situation and on 11 July 1803 wrote to General Lake "It will be highly desirable to detach M. Perron from Sindhia's service by pacific negotiation. M. Perron's inclination certainly is, to dispose of his power to a French purchaser; but I should not be surprised if he were to be found ready to enter into terms with your Excellency, provided he could obtain sufficient security for his personal interests."<sup>25</sup>

Perron, who had for some time been conscious of a decline in Sindhia's favour,<sup>26</sup> started correspondence with General Lake before the commencement of the war.<sup>27</sup>

### **PERRON'S NEGOTIATIONS FOR ESCAPE WAY**

General lake started from Kanpur on 7 August 1803. By this time he was authorised by the Governor General to conclude a convention with Perron, if comes the opportunity, with certain constraints.<sup>28</sup> At the same time Lord Wellesley cautioned Commander-in-Chief Lake to not let M. Perron avail some time or delay the attack in the name of negotiations.<sup>29</sup>

Perron, some time before the opening of the campaign, had addressed himself to the British government to obtain permission to enter the British territories and wanted to avoid the war and safe passage for withdrawal of his property and person.<sup>30</sup> This request was immediately granted by the Governor-general, in a private letter addressed to the commander in chief. But posterior events prevented Perron from profiting by that permission.

On the 20th August the commander in chief received a letter from Perron, wherein he expressed his surprise to see that the British army kept moving, towards Coel wherein Perron fortified himself, and demanded to be informed whether the British government was at war with Sindhia. It indicates, on Perron's side, the intention of bringing about some accommodation, which might prevent an encounter between the British forces and those under Perron's orders. General Lake answered M. Perron by explaining, in a general way, the cause of the

approach of his army, and begging him to send a confidential officer with whom he might explain himself on the subject of Perron's letter.<sup>31</sup> Lake flattered himself that Perron would accede to the proposals.

On the 27th August the Lake received another letter from M. Perron, expressing his earnest desire to find some convenient means of avoiding the war,<sup>32</sup> but nevertheless declined the proposition of sending an officer to British under the pretence that such a step would excite the jealousy of the court of Sindhia. Perron, however, demanded a confidential officer to be sent to confer with him. General Lake diplomatically denied the demand. He reasoned that the aim of the conference which he desired with Perron had no reference to the public affairs of the British and Sindhia, but to the private Interests of M. Perron, and to the means of executing, with safe and safety, his design of withdrawing from Sindhia's service. Lake repeated that he was ready to receive an officer from M. Perron, but at the same time told him not to renew his correspondence with M. Perron, unless he was willing to profit by the permission which had been granted, of sending an officer to the British camp; and warned of war if decision delayed.<sup>33</sup>

To buy some more time Perron decided to send his aid-de-camp, Mr. Beckett, to the British camp, to have a further explanation.<sup>34</sup> He answered Lake that it was his intention to stay in Sindhia's service during the present crisis, and that it was impossible for him to retire until his successor was appointed.<sup>35</sup> Perron by this time had decided to leave Coel, left a strong force there under one of his officers, named Pedron, and marched with his army towards Agra.<sup>36</sup> Coel was stormed on 29 Aug and all the correspondence ended. On the 7th of September, the army marched for Delhi.

However, on the 5th September General Lake received a letter from M. Perron, by which he renewed his demand for leave to retire to Lucknow, across the company's territory. The motive told by Perron for this demand was, that he had just learnt the appointment and approach of his successor, and the treachery of his European officers.<sup>37</sup> The easy capture of a fortress that he and his engineers had rendered, as they believed, impregnable, and the loss of all his military stores, sufficed to show him that he could not hope to withstand the progress of the British; and that it was better for him to resign, at once, than to continue a hopeless struggle, especially as the loss of Aligarh would excite the fury of Sindhia, and possibly lead to his arrest and execution.<sup>38</sup>

Perron, at the same time, requested permission to be escorted to Lucknow by his body guards, and that he might be furnished with an escort of British troops. General Lake granted Perron permission to pass over the company's territory to Lucknow, and authorised the escort of his body guards.<sup>39</sup> The commander in chief required him to begin his march on the second day after receiving the permission, and to prevent his escort from committing any pillage.

Wellesley, from this moment, considered Perron's defection as an event extremely favourable to the success of the British arms, and to the interests of the British government in India. This event relieved the neighbouring states and chiefs from the fear they had of Perron's power.<sup>40</sup> It contributed also to lessen the confidence which the native powers were accustomed to place in the fidelity of their French officers.<sup>41</sup>

Agreeably to the permission of the commander in chief Perron crossed the company's territory and arrived at Lucknow on the 01 October 1803. Special instructions were issued to the resident of Lucknow that Perron should be treated, during his residence at Lucknow, with the distinction due to the rank he held in the service of Doulat Rao Sindhia .<sup>42</sup>

The resident was ordered, in his instructions, to hasten, as much as possible, the departure of M. Perron and his suite from Lucknow. Perron, in company with Bickett and Fleury, set out from Lucknow to the Bengal presidency, 8th November, accompanied by a European officer and settled the neighbourhood of the French establishment of Chandernagor. Later he shifted to France.

For his desertion to his employer at the time of crisis Perron is much criticised by the scholar.<sup>43</sup> His successor, again a French national, Bourquine was not of that energy, valour and status that he can save a battle against a formidable enemy.<sup>44</sup> With his departure itself, Daulat Rao had lost the war in north. Battle of Laswarre at Delhi between Lake and Bourquin was only an event delay the inevitable. His betrayal left Sindhia no option but to concede a humiliating treaty. Perron abandonment of his master at a critical juncture shook the confidence of Indian princes into their non Indian commanders. This is one of the reasons of why do we not hear of any important non British non Indian commander afterwards.

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<sup>1</sup> Marshman, JOHN CLAKK, The History of India, Vol I, Serampore, 1863, p. 261

<sup>2</sup> Compton , Herbert , A Particular Account Of The European Military Adventurers Of Hindustan : From 1784 to 1803 (Hereafter Military Adventurers), London, p. 08

<sup>3</sup> Rollason, Cristofer, From Savoy To Agra: The Cross-Cultural Narrative Of Benoît De Boigne. Pegasus (Agra), Vol. VI ,2007, pp. 57-66.

<sup>4</sup> Compton , Herbert , Military Adventurers, p. 17

<sup>5</sup> He was commissioned in 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Madras Native Infantry. Compton , Herbert , Military Adventurers, p. 20

<sup>6</sup> Roberts, P. E, India under Wellesley. London, 1929, p. 221.

<sup>7</sup> On 14<sup>th</sup> July 1789, the commons stormed the royal prison on Bastille and this event marked the starting of The French Revolution

<sup>8</sup> Compton , Herbert , Military Adventurers, p. 08

<sup>9</sup> Cooper ,Randolf G. S. ,The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns and the Contest for India, London, 2004, p. 52

<sup>10</sup> Roberts, P. E, India under Wellesley. London, 1929, pp. 221-222.

<sup>11</sup> Compton , Herbert , Military Adventurers, pp. 81-82

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 83

<sup>13</sup> Roberts, P. E, op.cit., p. 222

<sup>14</sup> There was proposal of amalgamation of the King's and the Company's army. Though the proposal was dropped later on, but the officers in Bengal army mutinied in 1795. For details see : Marshman, J. Clark. The history of India: from the earliest period to the close of Lord Dalhousie's administration. London, 1871, p. 63

<sup>15</sup> Duff, J. G. The Mahrattas, Bombay, 1864 ,Vol III. p.175

<sup>16</sup> Grant Duff had met De Boigne after his retirement at Savoy in France to record the information and experiences about Marathas for his book 'The Marhattas'. See Footnote in Duff, J. G. The Mahrattas, Bombay, Vol III. p.175

<sup>17</sup> Roberts, P. E., India under Wellesley. London, 1929, p. 223

<sup>18</sup> Martin, Montgomery, ed., The Despatches, Minutes, and Correspondence of the Marquess Wellesley, KG, during his administration in India (Hereafter Wellesley Despatches), Vol IV, London, 1836, pp. 312-13. Also See Compton , Herbert , Military Adventurers, pp. 08-09

<sup>19</sup> Tipu was very optimistic regarding French support but France was not in a position to help him because of being herself in turmoil due to revolution in 1789. Earlier also Tipu was deceived by them. For details see, Gregory, James. 'Tipu Sultan's Embassy to the Court of Louis XVI: A Double Deception', The Indian Historical Review, Vol. XVII (1-2),1990-91, pp. 193-206. Also see Roberts, P. E, op. cit., p. 42

<sup>20</sup> Martin, Montgomery, ed., Wellesley Despatches, Vol I, p. 02 , Also see Marshman, JOHN CLAKK, The History of India, Vol I, Serampore, 1863, p. 493

<sup>21</sup> Martin, Montgomery, ed., Wellesley Despatches, Vol IV, p. 138. Also see Vol II, p. 666

<sup>22</sup> Martin, Montgomery, ed., Wellesley Despatches, Vol IV, p. 137

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp.153-154

<sup>24</sup> Roberts, P. E., India under Wellesley. London, 1929, p.223

<sup>25</sup> Martin, Montgomery, ed., Wellesley Despatches, Vol III, p. 220

<sup>26</sup> Young Doulut Rao Sindhia had become about this period suspicious of power, wealth and stature of M. Perron and Ambajee Ingli, a principal officer at the court has gained importance at Sindhia court by this time. Duff, J. G. The Mahrattas, Bombay, 1864 ,Vol III, p.145

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.177

<sup>28</sup> Which would give Perron every security for the preservation of his personal interests and property, and would grant him a reasonable reward from the British government, if he would relinquish his military resources, territorial possessions, the person of the Mogul, and that of his presumptive heir, to the commander in chief? See JOHN STOCKDALE, PICCADILLY , History Of All The Events

And Transactions Which Have Taken Place In India: Containing The Negotiations Of The British Government, Relative To The Glorious Success Of The Late War : Addressed to the Honorable Secret Committee of the Honorable Court of Directors the East India Company , London , 1805., p. 113

<sup>29</sup> In a letter on 11 July 1803 Lord Wellesley wrote to Lake , “I desire your Excellency however, to abstain from any negotiation which may afford M. Perron the opportunity of gaining time, or of preserving, by escape, or by any means, any part of his force, especially of his artillery, or ordnance.” Martin, Montgomery, ed., Wellesley Despatches, Vol III, p. 221

<sup>30</sup> Martin, Montgomery, ed., Wellesley Despatches, Vol III, p. 367

<sup>31</sup> John Stockdale, op. cit., p. 163

<sup>32</sup> One cause was that Perron was not sure of his subordinate British officers that their loyalty may change at the time of war. Lord Wellesley, through Lake, had made lucrative offers to the European officers if they change side or furnish secrets. Torrens, W. M., The Marquess Wellesley, architect of empire, Vol I, London, 1880, p. 269 . In fact forty of the British nationals have resigned their posts at the eve of the war. Roberts, P. E., India under Wellesley. London, 1929, p.225

<sup>33</sup> John Stockdale, op. cit., p. 164

<sup>34</sup> Martin, Montgomery, ed., Wellesley Despatches, Vol V, p. 76

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.,p. 75

<sup>36</sup> Henty, G. A., At the point of the bayonet: a tale of the Mahratta War, London, 1902 , p. 280

<sup>37</sup> Martin, Montgomery, ed., Wellesley Despatches, Vol V, p. 76

<sup>38</sup> Henty, G. A., op. cit., p. 281

<sup>39</sup> Lord Wellesley in his letter, dated March 27th, 1803, to Commander-in-Chief Lake had put condition that Perron will not be allowed to take more than 200 of his cavalry and 400 of his infantry as bodyguards. These troops were to return to Coel after leaving Perron at Lucknow with Resident. See Martin, Montgomery, ed., Wellesley Despatches, Vol III, pp. 62-63

<sup>40</sup> Martin, Montgomery, ed., Wellesley Despatches, Vol III, p. 192

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. , p. 368

<sup>42</sup> Compton , Herbert , Military Adventurers, p. 327

<sup>43</sup> The severest condemnation of Perron comes from one of his own countrymen. He writes ‘Perron, under the protection of the British Government, escaped the just vengeance of the Maratha, Sikhs, Rajputs, and all the people of India.... The conduct of this traitor assured to the English the supremacy of Hindustan, and has done more harm to the name of France than fifty years of misconduct and misfortune could have accomplished." See Compton , Herbert , Military Adventurers, p. 334-35

<sup>44</sup> Bourquin had been in 'turn a seaman, a cook, a manufacturer of fireworks, and a soldier'. Kincaid,C. A. and Parasnis, D.B. Rao Bahadur, “A History Of The Maratha People”, Oxford University Press, 1925, p. 196