

# Banda Singh Bahadur on the canvas of History

Dr. Sukhdial Singh\*

## PART II

Banda Singh Bahadur had complete control over his army and there was no robber in it. He had a well disciplined army under his command. This army was so much devoted to the cause that it saw nothing in the battle field but a destruction of the enemy. The baptised *Khalsa* was the backbone of his army. This was an army of Saint-Soldiers who always repeated the name of the Lord from their lips and always thought of war in their hearts. It was, in fact, comprised of the true and loyal Sikhs who once had sat at the feet of Guru Gobind Singh himself and had been touched by the promethean fire which animated the great pontiff himself. They rallied round Banda Singh Bahadur in a spirit of devotion and self-sacrifice as well as to carry on the crusade against the enemies of their movement. On the contrary of looting and plundering, hundreds of them sold all that whatever they had with them, purchased arms, and flocked to the new leader with a determination 'either to win the fight or to suffer martyrdom'. Banda Singh Bahadur infused such spirit into the hearts of these *Khalsa* Saint-Soldiers that even the most powerful and trained soldiers of the Mughal armies could not stand against them. His personal magnetism, his undaunted courage and extraordinary valour, knit these Saint--Soldiers, closely to him.

No robber or opportunist could deceive the *Khalsa* or its leader. At Sarhind, all the mosques and tombs stand in the same condition even today. All of this goes to the credit to the *Khalsa*. If the robbers were out of control then how could these tombs and mosques survive till today? Banda Singh Bahadur's first priority was to protect the religious places of Muslim society. He destroyed only the political establishments. He carried out even the funeral of those muslim soldiers who were killed in the war by muslim themselves. No Mughal soldier was burnt, rather they were buried with due respect.

In the guerilla warfare, Banda Singh was very successful. He was always first to attack the enemy. His attack was sudden and speedy. He attacked like a leopard and ran also like a leopard. He never passed through the straight ways. He moved on the arduous wild routes by concealing himself like leopard. When the enemy came under his blow he pounced upon him like a leopard. The author of *Asrar-I-Samadi*, a contemporary account, describes the movement of Banda Singh Bahadur and his *Khalsa* colleagues as that of lion and leopard. According to this author:

Lion-like they sprang upon the backs of the elephants, and flung on the ground those who were seated in the *haudas*.

Like leopards they would reach such places where even the fastest horse would be reluctant to proceed.<sup>1</sup>

He was never afraid of his enemy. He always irritated his enemy by his guerilla attacks. By his sudden and speedy attack he made his enemy stunned. The enemy could hardly settle and stand in the battle field, when Banda Singh caused a great loss to him. His attacks were full of magic-like acts. Many Mughal Generals were fed up with his guerilla tactics. In fact, his very name had acquired such a symbol of terror that his mere presence in the battle field was enough to strike terror in the hearts of the Nawabs and the Generals of the Mughal Empire.

The author of *Asrar-I-Samadi* writes that "He raised such a serious rebellion in the State that the news spread to as far off places as Rome and Sham. He wrought such devastation in the country that even a serpent in the innermost recesses of the earth writhed in pain. Such was the terror of his name that not even a single Mughal Commander ventured forward to face this man's sword. He brought resurrection to the land. He inflicted crushing

defeat on the most formidable Afghan *Faujdar*s Bayazid Khan and his nephew Shams Khan.”<sup>2</sup>

The battle of Lohgarh was very important from the guerilla tactics as well as from the angle of a pitched battle. Emperor Bahadur Shah attacked Lohgarh in 1710, but did not surround the fort at once. Moreover, he wasted a month in reaching Lohgarh from Sonapat. Banda Singh knew it well that his army was too small to face the royal forces. So he could run away easily towards mountains before the Emperor reached. But he did not run, rather he had been waiting for the Emperor as he wanted to fight with the royal forces. He fought and remained in the fort for a month. The royal forces could neither catch him nor kill him. When Banda Singh realised that his stores were about to finish in the fort and he could not fight any more while remaining there, he therefore, fled away from the fort. The royal forces were surprised with his safe flight. The battle of Lohgarh was the most important fight in Banda Singh’s life as a warrior and military General.

After the victory of Sarhind, when Banda Singh moved towards the Jamuna river, he crushed all the *Nawabs* and *Faujdar*s of that area up to Saharanpur, Jalalabad and Deoband. When he moved towards the western area of Punjab he crushed all the rulers upto Chamba and Jammu. A single kingdom flowed like a straw before him. Banda Singh was like a storm. Wherever he went he went like a storm and moved like a whirlwind. Probably, there was not a General of Mughal forces who had not been humbled by him in the battle field.

To pounce upon the enemy with an electric speed and to get out of the siege successfully had become like his magic act. The Enemy thought that this type of attacks and flights could not be carried on by a man, it must be the act of a magician. This supernatural horror and magical effect was so great that when in the compound of Gurdas-Nangal, Banda Singh fell unconscious due to hunger, even then the enemy did not approach him at once. The contemporary writers, who were viewing the last battle of Gurdas-Nangal, stated that if even a dog or a cat came out of Banda Singh’s compound, all of these were killed. Mughal officers thought that Banda Singh might get out of their clutches in the disguise of a cat or a dog. It was totally impossible for a cat or a dog, to think of it, where even a bird could not reach the seige over the months. But such views of contemporary writers show the standard level of their mind. Banda Singh was suddenly sieged in the compound of Gurdas-Nangal otherwise such a war-master could never be surrounded. Nature itself created such chances when even the great Generals got themselves killed in small encounters. The statement of Banda Singh at his last time clearly indicates that he was caught only after being fed-up of hunger otherwise none could dare to arrest him. Banda Singh was a follower of such a Guru who got the hawks hunted by the sparrows. Banda Singh proved his Guru’s theoretical Philosophy true in reality when he smashed the pride and honour of big Mughal armies by the strength of poor peasants, low-born people and the *Vanjaras*.

Banda Singh was one of the foremost leaders in Sikh History who had established Khalsa State in the land of Punjab. Hence his acquisitions were unique. It was not a simple task to make the Mughal empire to yield. It was one of the powerful empires of the world at that time and there was no source of help for the Sikhs. In spite of all these hurdles Banda Singh Bahadur was able to organise the troops in thousands. He won all the Mughal posts one by one and appointed his own officials in all the cities won by him. He snatched the fort -palace named Mukhlisgarh from the Mughal officers and made it his headquarter. The situation of this fort was important from the military point of view. Actually the low lying area below the fort of Lohgarh was a hilly slope and was full of lush green grass, woods and rivulets. This place was reserved by the Mughal rulers for hunting. Banda Singh got it repaired and had

given it the shape of a fort. The loneliness of the hills and the forests was a good supplying place of feed to the horses and other animals.

Banda Singh Bahadur possessed the high ideal of life, sincerity, honesty, indomitable spirit, unbounded enthusiasm, single-minded devotion to his cause, dare-devilry of the highest type and the nobility of character.<sup>3</sup> The secret of his success lay in his indomitable courage and unsurpassable activity, coupled with the invincible spirit and dogged tenacity of the Sikhs which made up for the scantiness of his resources.

The crusade under Banda Singh adopted an entirely different shape than that of the times of Guru Gobind Singh. The *Guru* was always defensive and after victories over his opponents, used to leave the place of fighting. But Banda Singh was an executive chief of the Khalsa and he executed his power by crippling and destroying the Mughal Empire in the Punjab. He occupied the territories, ousted the government officials and replaced them with his own. The *Suba* of Sarhind had twenty-eight *Parganas* and the officers of all of the *Parganas* were replaced, one by one by him. He abolished the *Zamindari* system and introduced peasant proprietorship which upto this day is recognized as one of the best fiscal reforms carried out by him. He applied his own policies. He forged an instrument of justice for the poor and the downtrodden and of severe chastisement for those who had been following the trade of oppression with impunity. According to Kesar Singh Chibber, Banda used to point out to his officials that according to the Holy *Granth* the best worship for a ruler is to be just. If you call yourselves the Sikhs of that great man, Guru Gobind Singh, did not do anything that was sinful, irreligious or unjust. He advanced the cause of true Sikhism and smite those who behaved in manner which had not been approved by the Sikh Gurus.<sup>4</sup>

It is believed by some that Banda Singh Bahadur followed the policy of blood and iron. It could be true in the circumstances he faced. The measures he adopted, only to execute justice and to punish the wrong-doers. He did so because he must have thought that such very measures could have brought home the tyrant officials. However, he also understood that cruelty and oppression did not always pay. He showed that the only way to meet the eternal foe was to adopt the policy of paying them in their own coin. He believed in the proverb that a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye was the way to payoff old scores. He fought battles, took prisoners, killed them and seized the enemy's property. He issued his coins, had his own official seal and gave orders which had the force of

*firmans* of Emperor. He was the first man among the Sikhs who laid down the foundation of political sovereignty of the Khalsa. He was the master of the whole region lying between the Sutlej and Jamuna and he reined and exacted tributes from all sections of the population.<sup>5</sup> He made Sikhism popular with the people of Punjab by his bravery and generosity. He had shown what the *Khalsa* State meant. He had brought about a revolution in the minds of the Sikhs. A will was created among the Sikhs to have their own way. Heads could be cut off, but the ideas remained, leading ultimately to success and final goal.

He was a great revolutionary who broke down the barriers of caste, creed and colour. He appointed sweepers and cobblers as big officers before whom high caste Hindus, *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas* stood with folded hands awaiting their orders. Irvine writes that 'In all the *Parganas* occupied by the Sikhs, the reversal of the previous customs was striking and complete. A low scavenger or leather-dresser, the lowest of the low in Indian estimation, had only to leave home and join Banda, when in a short time he would return to his birthplace as its ruler with his order of appointment in his hand. As soon as he set foot within the boundaries, the well-born and wealthy went out to greet him and escort him home. Arrived there, they stood before him with folded hands, awaiting his orders. Not a soul dared to disobey his order and men who had often risked themselves in battle fields,

became so cowed down that they were afraid even to remonstrate.<sup>6</sup>

Banda Singh Bahadur was a true Sikh, but not a religious fanatic. He never converted the fighting into a religious war. Though his opponents, the Mughal officials, often converted their fight into a *Jehad*. The *Moulvis* of Batala *Pargana* waged a religious war against Banda Singh but he did not do in the same way. According to the information supplied in the *Ruqaat-I--Amin-ul-Doula*, *Dastur-ul-Insha*, Banda Singh proclaimed that “we do not oppose Muslims and we do not oppose Islam. We only oppose tyranny and we only oppose usurpation of the political power which belongs to the people and not to the privileged individuals or to the Mughals.” As a result of his secular policy, both in theory and practice, Banda Singh had about five thousand Muslim soldiers in his army. He looked after them, fixed their wages and allowances and permitted them to read *khutba* and *namaz*. They were free to say their prayers in their own fashion. Testifying this, a royal news-writer, reported to the Mughal Emperor on 28th April, 1711 as follow:

“The wretched Nanak-worshipper has his camp in the town of Kalanaur upto the 19th instant. During the period he has promised and proclaimed ‘I do not oppress the Muslims’. Accordingly, for any Muslim who approaches him, he fixed a daily allowances and wages and looks after him. He has permitted them to *khutba* and *namaz*. As such, five thousand Muslims have gathered around him. Having entered into his friendship, they are free to shout their call and say prayers in the army of the wretched Sikhs.”<sup>7</sup>

Banda Singh Bahadur established new traditions in Sikh history. He assumed royal authority and struck coins in the name of the *Sikh Gurus*. They bore the following inscriptions:

*Sikka zad bar har do aalam teg-I-Nanak vahib ast.*

*Fateh Gobind Singh Shah-I-Shahan fazal-I-sachha Sahib ast.*

“By the grace of the true Lord is struck the coin in the two worlds. The sword of Nanak is the granter of all boons, and the victory is of Guru Gobind Singh, the King of Kings.”

The reverse of the coins had the following words in praise of his newly founded capital:

*Zarb ba-amaan - dehar, musavarat shehar,*

*Zinat takhat mubarak bakhat.*

“Struck in the City of peace, illustrating the beauty of civic life and the ornament of the blessed throne”.

He also introduced an official seal for his state documents and letters patent. It contained the following inscription expressive of his deep sense of devotion and loyalty to his master.

*Deg o teg o fateh o nusrat bederang.*

*Yaft az Nanak Guru Gobind Singh.*

The Kettle and the Sword (the symbols of charity and power) victory and ready patronage have been obtained from Guru Nanak and Gobind Singh.

This was the tradition which was established by Banda Singh Bahadur and no Sikh ruler after him could ignore it. Every Sikh ruler, had to adopt the inscriptions inscribed on the coins struck by Banda Singh. It should be remembered that easier is to follow the tradition than establishing it. Banda Singh Bahadur was the leader who established the new traditions in the Sikh history. He was selfless and true servant of the *Panth*. He accumulated no riches and he built no palaces for himself. Whatever territory he captured was in the name of the Khalsa Commonwealth. It was not considered to be his personal domains. He was the champion of the downtrodden, irrespective of whether they were Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus. He was a man of valour, cool in the face of death and a staunch believer in Sikh faith. At the time of his execution, when given a choice between Islam and death, he

opted the latter. He sacrificed his innocent son before his own eyes.

Banda Singh Bahadur was the first leader to place before the Sikhs a practical demonstration of Khalsa nationalism, to teach them to sacrifice themselves willingly at the altar of the Khalsa. The very thought of the noble example of the great martyr and his companions had contributed to elevate the minds of his people who had, in turn, supplied the pages of history with still nobler examples. It was through him that the path to conquest was discovered by the Khalsa.

The Khalsa revolution under the leadership of Banda Singh Bahadur was in no way a transitory military affair. It was full-fledged war against the Mughal imperialism for the emancipation of their Father - land from the shackles of oppressive and tyrannical rule. Though the struggle was, occasionally, indulged in avenging the tyranny of Wazir Khan but it took no time to make itself an open declaration of its design to replace the Mughals as a sovereign power in the Punjab. The active support which Banda Singh received from the downtrodden, the poor peasants, herdsmen and *vanjaras* had made the social struggle aspect of the conflict sufficiently articulate. The Zamindari system was abolished and the tillers of the cultivating lands were made the masters. This marked a revolutionary change in the social order in the Punjab and led to the emergence of small peasants as a potent force in the political life of the state. Though his state was short lived yet through his revolutionary reforms he had succeeded in giving the people a foretaste of it. The revolution, even in its failure, had served the purpose of victorious armed impression. The astonishing victories of Banda Singh Bahadur had earned for the Sikhs a prestige and a Marshall reputation which had never before been associated with them. The Khalsa, even in the wake of the defeat, had become a household name for daring acts and sacrifice. Militarily also, it had an impact on the Mughal might. Banda Singh Bahadur had broken the charisma of the Mughal invincibility. The tillers of the land, the hewers of the wood, the drawers of the water, the traders of grains, the *vanjaras* had fought the born soldiers for seven years and not always without success. Man to man, the saint-soldiers of the Guru had proved their worth. Out-numbered and out-gunned, though they had been defeated, but instead of bringing disillusionment and despair in its train the defeat had left them even more confident of their strength and capabilities. Besides, the armed struggle had generated a spirit of revolt among the Sikhs which was a hard to suppress as it was difficult to generate. Though the Mughals had succeeded in crushing the Sikhs and restoring a semblance of imperial authority, the passive consent of a large majority of the Sikhs could not be taken for granted.

Consequently, it may be stated with a firm belief that Banda Singh Bahadur was the leader who practised the Sikh Principles in his policies as well as in his day to day life. What was established and preached by Guru Nanak was practically consolidated by Guru Gobind Singh by creating the Khalsa. It was Banda Singh Bahadur who achieved all those objectives for whose fulfillment, Guru Nanak had started his mission. Guru Gobind Singh was a spirit and Banda Singh Bahadur was a body. When the spirit entered the body, both mingled with each other, resulted in a revolution. When Banda Singh came to Punjab there occurred a revolution. The *Khalsa* State was established on the ruins of the mighty Mughal Empire in the Punjab.

The activities and the achievements of Banda Singh Bahadur vividly show that neither he could be frightened by the armed forces nor could be moved by any greed. He had patience and therefore, could tolerate his baby son to be butchered in his own lap by the executioner. He could pierce his body bit by bit. Banda Singh's bravery and the nature of self-sacrifice cannot be described in words. It can be enquired only from Guru Gobind Singh. O Guru!

you yourself tell us what was Banda Singh? Was he an ordinary man like us or a supernatural human being? It is really beyond our estimation how a human being could be above the feelings of pains and parental attachment? Banda Singh Bahadur himself was an example of his own.

**[End of Part II]  
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### **References**

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3. See also Hari Ram Gupta, *History of the Sikhs*, Vol.II, New Delhi, 1978, p. 37.
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6. William Irvine, *Later Mughals*, London, 1922, pp. 98-99.
7. 'Akhbar-i-Darbar-i-Mualla' in *The Panjab Past and Present*, Punjabi University, Patiala, October 1984, p.228.