

The role of Mata Sundri in Sikh struggle

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DELHI IS ONE OF THE HOLIEST destinations of Sikh pilgrims as there are nine historical gurdwaras here. Right from the 17th century, or even before, a community of Sikhs called 'Dilwali Sangat' lived in Kucha Dilwali Singh, near Ajmeri Gate, of the old Walled City of Delhi.

In 1704 A.D., when Guru Gobind Singh was forced to vacate Anandpur, his family got scattered and Sikhs of Anandpur left the city in two groups. The first group consisted of Mata Gujri, mother of Guru Gobind Singh, and the two younger Sahibzadas, Mata Sundri and Mata Sahib Devan (known as 'Virgin Palanquin' and later as 'Mother of the Khalsa'). Mata Sundri and Mata Sahib Devan proceeded to Delhi along with Bhai Mani Singh. They were accompanied by two Sikhs of Delhi, named Dhanna Singh and Jawahar Singh. With this group were also two maid servants, named Bibo and Bhago. This group of seven persons reached Dilwali Street, near Ajmeri Gate. The group had travelled on foot for many days before reaching Delhi.

The second group included Guru Gobind Singh himself and the two elder Sahibzadas, Sahib Ajit Singh and Sahib Jujhar Singh, and only a handful of Sikhs and left towards Chamkaur in Ropar district. Hardly had they covered a small distance, when the armies of the Mughal enemy, breaking their oaths, attacked Guru Gobind Singh's Sikhs. A fierce battle was fought on the banks of the river Sirsa. Guru Gobind Singh and his two elder Sahibzadas and the Sikhs with him, lodged themselves in a temporary fortress (Kachi Garhi) at Chamkaur where a violent battle took place. Guru Gobind Singh had only 40 men with him. These hungry, thirsty and unarmed Sikhs still gave a brave fight to the hordes of the Mughal foe. To keep the enemy away from the Garhi (Stockade), first arrows were exchanged and later physical blows with swords and spears. Sahibzada Ajit Singh also volunteered to fight the enemy. He showed exemplary bravery, but ultimately embraced martyrdom. Then Sahib Jujhar Singh, the younger brother also requested his father to fight the enemy, and embraced martyrdom too.

The circumstances in which Guru Gobind Singh and the two elder Sahibzadas had to leave Anandpur were indeed tragic. Guru Gobind Singh was a valorous fighter. Along with the Hindu Hill Rajas, he had inflicted a severe defeat earlier on the Mughal Imperial forces at the battle of Nadaun, as described in stirring verses by Guru Gobind Singh himself in his autobiography (*Vichitar Natak*).

When the news of this disaster reached Aurangzeb, the then Mughal Emperor, he was filled with rage. The Mughal forces besieged the town of Anandpur, they also cut off the water supply. The ration stores were also empty. The Sikhs faced starvation and certain death. Guru Gobind Singh's favourite horses also died for want of fodder. His famous elephant called 'Prasadi' which earlier, Raja Ratan Rai of Assam had gifted to him also met the same fate. It is written that the Sikhs ground dried bark of trees and ate it. They made daring forages on the Mughal army surrounding the town and plundered their rations at the great risk to themselves. The Guru had to starve and so did his family, including his mother and children. But the

Guru would not agree to the suggestion that they should flee Anandpur and seek refuge elsewhere. While the Sikhs dared not approach the Guru, they went to his mother, Mata Gujri and suggested to her that, as it was an unequal fight, if they remained at Anandpur, they would die of starvation. But the Guru refused to listen to anyone. He was determined to hold and fight to the last.

At this juncture, Aurangzeb sent a letter that if the Guru and his Sikhs vacated Anandpur, they would not be attacked. At the same time, forty Sikhs approached the Guru to allow them to escape as they could not bear the travails of hunger and want anymore. The Guru told them that if they wished to leave against his wishes, they should sign disclaimer (*bê-dâwâ*). This desperate lot of disciples were prepared to do this. They wrote a disclaimer and deserted the Guru. But when they reached their homes, their mothers and wives rebuked them. Later, these unhappy Sikhs who had disclaimed their Guru at Anandpur, relented, and under the command of Mai Bhago, came to Khidrana, in Ferozepur district, requesting Guru Gobind Singh for his pardon. A fierce battle had taken place at that place against huge Mughal forces, and 39 of these forty Sikhs died fighting. The last one, Mahan Singh wounded, seemed to have a life in him, so Guru Gobind Singh picked him up. Mahan Singh fell at his feet asking for forgiveness, and for the disclaimer to be torn. The Guru then pulled out the disclaimer that he had carried with him all these days and tore it to pieces. Seeing this, Mahan Singh breathed his last. These then are the Forty Muktas whose souls were emancipated. These Sikhs (*Muktas*) are the emancipated ones whom every Sikh remembers in his daily *Ardas*. The Guru blessed Mai Bhago who also attained salvation later.

Guru Gobind Singh and his two elder Sahibzadas and a handful of Sikhs, after crossing the Sirsa river on the night of the 5th and 6th December 1705 reached Chamkaur, near Ropar, and occupied the fort. There a fierce battle took place. The Mughal army surrounded the fortress from all sides. Bhai Uday Singh, the commander of the Guru's forces, and three out of five Panj Piaras (Bhai Daya Singh, Bhai Dharam Singh and Bhai Mohkam Singh) along with two elder Sahibzadas received martyrdom. The Guru was left with only five Sikhs and proceeded towards the forest of Machhiwara. Fortunately at this cross, Guru was helped by two Pathans, named Ghani Khan and Nabi Khan. They saved the Guru from being captured by the Mughals. As the Guru was made to sit on a palanquin carried by Nabi Khan and Ghani Khan and other attendants, all enquirers were told that this was '*Uch ka Pir*' (a Muslim saint from Multan). In this way after passing many hurdles Guru Gobind Singh reached Muktsar. From there he sent *Hukumnamas* to different places and again collected a number of devotees. Then from Deena, Guru Gobind Singh sent a Persian epistle called *Zafarnama* (letter of victory) to Aurangzeb.

Later when he reached Damdama Sahib (Talwandi Sabo, District Bhatinda), Aurangzeb's reply came. In his letter the emperor was moved by the contents of the *Zafarnama*, and issued orders that the Guru was not to be troubled any further. Indeed Aurangzeb invited Guru Gobind Singh to meet him in the Deccan. But when the Guru reached as far south as Rajputana, he heard the news of Aurangzeb's death on 2nd March 1707. The Guru then proceeded to Nanded, in Maharashtra, and expired on 17th October 1708. Since Aurangzeb's successor, Bahadur Shah apologised to Guru Gobind Singh and became his friend, Wazir Khan of Sirhind, who

had killed the Guru's younger sons, could not tolerate this friendship and sent assassins to Nanded who stabbed Guru Gobind Singh mortally.

The third group which was separated from the Guru was his mother and two younger Sahibzadas, Sahib Fateh Singh and Sahib Zorawar Singh. They were taken by their former servant, Gangu to the village Sahary. Gangu noticed that Mata Gujri had some gold ornaments on her; he turned treacherous. During the night Gangu stole the ornaments and other costly items that Mata Gujri was carrying. When Mata Gujri inquired about this theft, Gangu became furious. He informed the Mughal commander of Morinda that Mata Gujri and the two Sahibzadas were staying with him. The commander immediately arrested them. He informed the Nawab of Sirhind who was pleased to have the two sons of his sworn enemy in his custody. Then, with a view to gaining favour from the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, he ordered the Sahibzadas to be bricked alive into a wall. This place, now a grand Gurdwara, is Fatehgarh Sahib. The choice before the children was death or conversion to Islam. The young 'cubs of the lion' Guru Gobind Singh, frowned at this. They would not give up their faith come what may. This most heinous crime in the world's history took place on 12th Dec. 1705. Mata Gujri died of shock.

The news of all these above events reached Mata Sundri in Delhi. Mata Sundri, the bereaved mother, lived for about forty years after the demise of her husband, Guru Gobind Singh. Little is known about early life of Mata Sundri. She was born in 1667 AD. Her father, Bhai Ram Saran was a well to do Khatri of Lahore. As a child, Sundri was extremely beautiful, so her parents gave her this name according to her looks. Her father used to come frequently to pay respects to Guru Tegh Bahadur at Anandpur Sahib. He approached Mata Gujri and her brother Kirpal Chand for a matrimonial alliance of Guru Gobind Singh with Sundri. It was agreed but Bhai Ram Saran wanted to perform the marriage at Lahore. So Guru Gobind Singh founded a new city called Guru-ka-Lahore, 15 kilometres away from Anandpur. It is interesting to recall that Guru Nanak had founded a new city, Kartarpur; Guru Amar Das brought Goindwal into existence, and Guru Arjun Dev have founded the cities of Amritsar and Taran Tarn. Guru Hargobind established Kartarpur, and Guru Tegh Bahadur laid the foundations of Anandpur. The Tenth Guru now started the foundation of Guru-ka-Lahore. This town became populated in a short time. Sundri's marriage had taken place in 1686 AD. She gave birth to Sahibzada Ajit Singh in 1689. Guru Gobind Singh's second wife was Mata Jito. She gave birth to three sons. Sahibzada Jujhar Singh was born in 1690. Sahib Zorawar Singh was born in 1696 and Sahib Fateh Singh was born in 1699. Mata Jito passed away in 1701. After this, one Bhai Reva, also of Lahore came to Anandpur along with a Sikh congregation, to offer his daughter Sahib Devan in marriage to Guru Gobind Singh, but Guru replied that he had taken a vow not to indulge any more in the marital life. Upon great persuasion the Guru acceded to the humble request of Bhai Reva and other Sikhs with a condition that Sahib Devan would have to pass the whole life in celibacy to serve the Guru and the Khalsa.

Mata Sundri participated actively in the spiritual discourses held in Anandpur in both periods of her stay there and also at Paonta. Mata Sundri displayed a great interest in every task of Guru Gobind Singh. She was witness to every action and tried to give a new inspiration and enthusiasm to her husband. The life of Guru Gobind Singh was throughout full of struggle, and both Mata Sundri and Mata Jito

took an active part in the Guru's activities. Both the *Mahals* had visited Guru Gobind Singh in Damdama in 1706 when Guru Gobind Singh was resting there. Through Bhai Mani Singh he dictated the revised version of the Guru Granth Sahib in which he inscribed the shaloks of his father Guru Tegh Bahadur but not his own, which is a separate text called the Dasam Granth, compiled later by Mata Sundri and Bhai Mani Singh.

Mata Sahib Devan also visited the Guru at Nanded, but the Guru told her to return to Delhi to keep the company of Mata Sundri at Delhi. During this period of loneliness in Delhi, Mata Sundri also adopted a five-year old child whom she named Ajit Singh. He later got married, and his son was named Hathi Singh. Mata Sundri had also introduced this new Ajit Singh to the Guru at Damdama Sahib. Guru Gobind Singh said, "This boy will cause trouble for you." The Guru's prophecy came true. As Macauliffe, the British historian in his book, of six volumes, titled Sikh Religion pp. 254-257 writes "Ajit Singh started calling himself a "Guru".

The then Mughal emperor was Farrukhsiyar. He was not friendly to the Sikhs like his predecessor Bahadur Shah. It is written that one day Ajit Singh was passing near the Jama Masjid in Delhi in a procession as his drummers announced, but Muslim priests were already jealous of Ajit Singh and looked down at his royal grandeur. So, on hearing the complaint of Muslim priests, Farrukhsiyar ordered that Ajit Singh should give up Sikhism, or be imprisoned. Equipped with this order, a Muslim police officer approached Ajit Singh. But Ajit turned a coward, unlike Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Arjun who had offered their heads for the faith, having no courage or spiritual power which a Sikh is enjoined to have, Ajit Singh cut his long hair. When Mata Sundri, then in Damdama Sahib heard this, she was plunged into deep mental agony. She totally disowned Ajit Singh and his son Hathi Singh. Some of the companions of Ajit Singh had killed a Muslim Fakir (a beggar) and the Mughal Government tied up Ajit Singh to the foot of an elephant and had him dragged through the streets of Delhi. It is recorded that his head came under the feet of the elephant and was crushed. His death, as such, is recorded to be in 1723 AD.

According to the traditions of Sikh Gurus, Guru's *langar* (free community kitchen) was set up by Mata Sundri in her haveli. Because of the paucity of funds in this *langar*, Mata Sundri passed the first edict in 1717, followed by eight more edicts for the continuance of the Guru's *langar* in Delhi. There were then in Delhi only 1700 Sikhs. But the Guru's *langar* was open to everybody of any caste or religion.

With the help of Bhai Mani Singh, Mata Sundri got compiled and consolidated the writings of Guru Gobind Singh and she led the Khalsa Panth. In between, Mata Sundri also appointed Mani Singh as the Granthi of Darbar Sahib in Amritsar. Thereby Mani Singh settled the quarrel between two rival groups: one who believed Banda Bahadur as guru, and the other who were Tat Khalsa, the pure Sikhs, as Guru Gobind Singh had said that there would be no personal guru after his demise and that Sikhs would worship only the Shabad Guru.

Bhai Mani Singh opened, in Amritsar, a school of the exposition of the Guru Granth Sahib and had another copy of the Guru Granth Sahib prepared. Bhai Mani Singh also wrote a separate volume of the sayings of the Bhagats, both Hindus and Muslims, whose sayings are included in Guru Granth Sahib. With great endeavour, Bhai Mani Singh had traced all the sayings and writings of the last Guru and edited

the same. If Mata Sundri had not arranged to have the works of the Tenth Guru collected after his death and had she not seen the editing of Bhai Mani Singh, the entire Sikh world would have been deprived of the sublime poetry of these compositions. It is entirely owing to Mata Sundri that the world now knows Guru Gobind Singh, not only as a revolutionary warrior but also a poetic genius. Thus, Mata Sundri bravely carried out the unfinished work of Guru Gobind Singh, who, it may be said that throughout the annals of human history, there was no other individual who could be a more inspiring personality than Guru Gobind Singh.

Bhai Mani Singh was martyred in 1737 AD in Lahore by the Mughals and Mata Sundri expired in Delhi in 1747. Her last stay was at the place which is now known as Gurdwara Mata Sundri, located at the back of present Jayprakash Narayan hospital (formerly called Irwin Hospital). Gurdwara Bala Sahib on the outer Ring Road of New Delhi commemorates Mata Sundri as well as her companion for many years, Mata Sahib Devan who had passed away earlier.

