

Banda Bairagi - as Singh Bahadur and Badshah Mahindar Singh (NY)*

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Guru Gobind Singh, after the martyrdom of his four sons and his mother, spent about a year in the Malwa region of Punjab, around Muktsar, and settled, for some time, in the village of Talwandi Sabo, now called Damdama Sahib (“breathing place”) in the present district of Bhatinda, which is also now one of the five Sikh takhts. From here, Guru Gobind Singh wrote a letter to Emperor Aurangzeb, who was responsible for martyrdom of Guru Gobind Singh’s father, Guru Tegh Bahadur, and his two younger sons, telling him of the perfidy of his officials, particularly of the crime committed by Wazir Khan of Sirhind, who had ordered the execution of his younger sons, Zorawar Singh, aged 9 years, and Fateh Singh, aged 7 years; even as the manner of their execution was horrible – for two young children were ‘walled in alive.’

This letter to Aurangzeb is called ‘Zafarnama’, meaning “epistle of victory”. Guru Gobind Singh’s emissary succeeded in handing over this letter to Aurangzeb in the Deccan. The Emperor, after reading the contents of the letter was greatly moved, and issued orders that the Guru was not to be molested any further. But Aurangzeb did not punish Wazir Khan, which Guru Gobind Singh expected him to do. Aurangzeb passed away in Ahmadnagar on March 2, 1707 A.D. and the battle for succession started among his sons. But with the help of Guru Gobind Singh, Bahadur Shah became the Mughal Emperor. As Bahadur Shah had previously shown some consideration for Guru Gobind Singh, so the Guru sent a detachment of Sikh horsemen who fought in the battle on June 8, 1707, which Bahadur Shah won to become the Emperor. Guru Gobind Singh went to Agra to pay Bahadur Shah a formal visit. The Guru was welcomed and given a jewelled scarf and presents worth Rs. 60,000. The Guru stayed in Agra for four months, but the Emperor did not take any action to punish Wazir Khan. Bahadur Shah went to the Deccan to suppress the rebellion of his brother Kam Baksh, while Guru Gobind Singh and his followers arrived in Nanded, a small town on the banks of the river Godavari, in September 1708, and encamped there.

On October 5, 1708, Guru Gobind Singh, finding his end near, passed on the spiritual Guruship to the *Adi Granth* (Guru Granth Sahib as “Shabad Guru”) and transferred the corporate Guruship to the Khalsa. Thus the concept of Guru-Khalsa as Guru-Panth caught on immediately. At Nanded, Guru Gobind Singh’s guards were not allowed to question or stop anyone. So, one evening, two young pathans entered his tent, and finding the Guru alone, stabbed him in the abdomen. The motive for the murderous assault was never known as the assassins were slain immediately. But there seems little doubt that the assassins were hirelings of Wazir Khan who wanted to prevent the Guru from turning the Emperor Bahadur Shah against him. The Guru’s wounds were stitched, and it was hoped that he would recover. But, a few days later, Guru Gobind Singh realized that his end had come. **He assembled his followers and told them that the line of Gurus was to end with him and the Sikhs thereafter were to look upon the Guru Granth Sahib as the everlasting “Shabad Guru” and perpetual guide.** Guru Gobind Singh passed away at mid-night of October 7 1708 AD.

Now, the third anniversary of the Guruship being given to Guru Granth Sahib, is being celebrated at Nanded, and everywhere else in October 2008.

Although Guru Gobind Singh had tried to persuade Bahadur Shah to take action against

Wazir Khan, yet thinking that he may not do anything, Guru Ji wanted to send one of his loyal followers to Punjab to rouse the peasantry. Surprisingly, an ascetic, named Banda Bairagi, whom he had known only for a few weeks, was chosen for this assignment. Banda was born in 1670 A.D. at Rajouri (Poonch) of Rajput parents and he had joined a band of mendicants. It is stated, in the *Sikh Review* of April 1961, that before Banda's going to Punjab, he was baptized as a Khalsa. Guru Gobind Singh bestowed Banda with five arrows from his quiver, and gave him his own standard and battle drum. The Guru also issued orders (Hukumnama) to the Sikhs urging them to volunteer for service.

Banda reached with his followers near Delhi and planted the Guru's standard at the Red Fort. At that time the Emperor was in Deccan to crush the rebellion by his brother Kam Baksh. From Delhi, Banda travelled north. The Hukumnamas of the Guru had invoked instant response and the people of Malwa straight-away gathered under Banda's banner, while many Sikhs, Hindus and even Muslims, from Majha and Doaba moved in an organized manner to arrive at Kiratpur after fighting their way across Malerkotla.

It is recorded in *Fatehnama* 1722-23, that people as far away as Iran, Turan, Kandhar, Multan and neighbouring areas started pouring into Punjab in disguise, and even openly by beat of drum. **Banda's proclamation calling upon all those who had suffered at the hands of oppressive zamindars, or were tormented by anti-social elements, bullies and despots to join him to get justice, opened up a Pandora's box. It evoked an overwhelming response from people of all faiths, including Hindus and Muslims to create vistas for a people's revolution.** He ransacked the state treasury and the houses of the rich at Sonapat and worsted the small detachment carrying government treasury at Kaithal, of both cash and horses. In his first major action, he stormed Samana on November 26, 1709, leaving 10,000 dead and followed up by routing Faujdars of Kapuri and Mustafabad. Kaithal fell without much resistance and then Banda conquered Samana, a wealthy town which was also the home of the executioners of the Ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur and executioners of Guru Gobind Singh's sons. Samaana was the first notable victory for Sikh army under Banda Bahadur.

Banda proceeded on his triumphant march through the heart of Malwa and, on May 24, 1710, Banda stormed Sirhind where Wazir Khan was killed and Sucha Nand, the Diwan who had pressed Wazir Khan to execute the Guru's sons was taken alive. Wazir Khan's palace and the treasury of Sucha Nand yielded handsome booty to Banda and his conquerors.

Banda was now virtual master of the territories between the Jamuna and the Satluj, yielding an annual revenue of 36 lakhs of rupees. His glory was in the ascendant. So Banda became 'Bahadur' from 'Bairagi'. Then Banda introduced a new calendar dating from his capture of Sirhind. **He had new coins struck to mark his reign, bearing the names of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh.** His seal had inscribed on it not only the names of the Gurus but also the two things that had contributed the most to the power and popularity of the Sikh Dharma – the *deggh*, or cauldron in the Guru's *langar*, and the *tegh*, the sword of the Khalsa. So, by such actions, Banda became 'Badshah' from 'Bahadur'.

The people's revolt spread across the Satluj over the whole of Majha country. Starting from Amritsar, the peasant armies marched Northwards towards the hills taking Kalanaur, Batala and Pathankot. They then overran the tract between the Satluj and the Ravi. **The Punjab became a surging sea of free peasantry with only two small islands of Mughal authority in its midst – the capital city of Lahore and the Afghan town of Kasur. Mughal officials tried to suppress the uprising by appealing to the religious sentiments of the Muslim peasantry, but it did not work.** Then, on those fateful days

Banda could have even captured Delhi and Lahore, and so would have changed the entire course of Indian history. But Banda showed a lack of decision which proved fatal to his dreams.

Bahadur Shah died on February 28, 1712 and, in the final stage, Banda's stand at Gurdaspur and Nangal could not succeed, as Bahadur Shah's successor, Farrukh Siyar, and his son Zakaria Khan, had specific instructions to destroy Banda. Banda fled northwards, but, instead of disappearing in the mountains, he stopped a few miles above the present town of Gurdaspur, where Zakaria Khan and his companion Abdus Samad Khan surrounded Banda and laid siege to Banda's town. Banda's men suffered due to starvation and Abdus Samad Khan ordered the immediate execution of over 200 Sikh prisoners. Banda and his family were put in chains and sent first to Lahore and then to Delhi. Zakaria Khan, who escorted the captives to Delhi, rounded up all the Sikhs he could find in the villages en route, until he had 700 bullock carts 'full of severed heads' and seven hundred prisoners.

The historian, Kafi Khan writes in his book *Muntakhib-ul-Labab*, that one of the Sikh prisoners was a newly married young man, the only son of a widow. The mother succeeded in obtaining his pardon from the Emperor, and she brought the order of release just in time to save her son. The mother said that "my son is not a Sikh". But the boy refused to be spared. He told the Mughals: "My mother is a liar. I devote my heart and soul to my Gurus, so let me join my companions who are to be executed. **The boy went back to his executioner and is counted among the truest martyrs of Sikhism.**

Thus, Banda died on 25 June, 1716. Banda, a man who first chose to renounce the world, to live in the peaceful seclusion of a sylvan hermitage, then renounced both pacifism and the life of solitude to rouse a downtrodden peasantry to take up arms. **So Banda, who shook one of the most powerful empires of the world to its very foundations, with grim resolve, so that it was never quite able to re-establish its authority. This was the Sikh character.**

The Tercentenary of Banda Singh Bahadur's martyrdom will be observed on 25th June, 2016.

