

Turbulent Times: Sikhs in the 18th Century: 1768 onwards

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PART III®

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BY 1768 PUNJAB WAS FREE AFTER eight long centuries of thralldom. The Sikhs had now reached the pinnacle of their power. Their territories stretched from the Indus in the West, the hill territories in the East to the environs of Delhi. However the very victories that had given power to them would cause differences. Flush with victories, there was a desire to conquer more.

Rivalry: Now not only was there no clear and present danger that had kept them together but they wanted action and adventure. They also needed resources for the benefit of their kingdoms as they now had a serious responsibility to their subjects. They had already inspired their subjects with their fighting abilities - now they had to ensure prosperity. Whilst they did raid the Rohilla territory and the environs of Delhi, it was inevitable that in their desire for influence and resources they would collide with the Marathas, the Hill Rajas, Oudh and even their own co-religionists. In respect of the latter the fragile unity could disrupt at any moment. And indeed it did. Old enmities were to come to the fore, greed and personal ambitions would play a part. There were other irritants: territories had been divided in a haphazard manner so that very often they intermingled - this was so, for example, between the Ramgarhias and Kanhaiyas both in the Upper Bari Doab and the Jalandhar Doab. In Amritsar too where each Sardar had their *Bungas* (residential quarters) and *Katras* (bazaars) joint boundaries sometimes soured relations especially latter with the shortage of real estate in the city centre near the Harmandir Sahib. There were bound to be disputes on the distribution of gains and finally ego clashes between the very independent minded leaders, the feeling sometimes misplaced, that they were inferior to none. Unity therefore was bound to suffer. There were of course signs of disunity and tension even before this period.

Ambition: There was the ever present irritant of the relations between the Phulkian Rajas of Patiala and the Sikh Sirdars. Although sometimes referred to as the 12th Misl, the Rajas of Patiala appeared at times to be more friendly to the Mughals and the Afghan conquerors than to their co-religionists. The situation of their territory near Delhi and on the way of any conqueror coming to Delhi ensured - that their actions and diplomacy were geared to ensuring their survival which was not always in the interests of the Khalsa. Their ambition which translated into occupying territory not belonging to them led to conflicts with the Sikh Chiefs, some of whom decided to destroy their kingdom. In 1765 Ala Singh had cooperated with Ahmad Shah who had even given him the title of Raja. This had incensed members of the Khalsa, particularly Hari Singh Bhangi, who with the Taruna Dal appeared at the gates of Patiala territory. It was Jassa Singh Ahluwalia who had come to the rescue of Ala Singh and saved his kingdom. In 1779 Abdul Ahad, the Grand Wazir of Delhi invaded Patiala territory, hellbent on raising cash for the Imperial treasury. Again, Jassa Singh along with most of the other Sikh Sardars had given timely help.

'The House of Patiala would have been snuffed out in its infancy but for his ungrudging and benign support' (K. Natwar Singh- *The Magnificent Maharaja* pp 18; Harper Collins, New Delhi 1998).

Ambition: Conflict was rampant. In 1774 Jai Singh Kanhaiya, Charat Singh Suckerchakia and Brij Raj Dev were ranged against Jhanda Singh Bhangi and Ranjit Dev of Jammu. Fighting broke out at Udhochak (near Sialkot). Charat Singh died accidentally when his gun barrel burst. Jai Singh, realising his ineffectiveness against the Bhangis under these circumstances, engineered Jhanda Singh's murder. Ganda Singh, heartbroken, retired from the battle, leaving Jammu in the hands of Jai Singh Kanhaiya. -The opportunity for revenge would come soon enough. Upon the death of Nodh Singh, a Bhangi Sardar of Pathankot, his widow offered her daughter (with the dowry of Pathankot) to Tara Singh of Kalanaur, a Kanhaiya ally. Tara married her and promptly killed both mother and daughter and became sole owner of the estate. Ganda Singh was furious. A battle (for Pathankot) took place between Ganda Singh, Ranjit Deo and Ramgarhia on one hand and Jai Singh Kanhaiya, Charat Singh and Jassa Singh Ahluwalia on the other - at Sundar Chak. It raged for weeks only to be stopped by heavy rains, which lasted without a break for one and a half months.

Confederation: Whilst Jassa Singh did his utmost to preserve unity through maintaining a balance of power between the Mislis and in this matter even helping and protecting Patiala despite the latter's predilections, even he became responsible for a great rift in the Khalsa, although through no fault of his own. This was the tension with the Ramgarhias- Whilst on extremely close and cordial terms with each other, having fought most of the greatest battles side by side, some tension had commenced when they were on opposing sides at the battle of Sundar Chak. There was also disagreement about revenue sharing in certain contiguous areas. Ramgarhia too had ambitions of leading the Panth, which he did briefly when Jassa Singh Ahluwalia was injured. There was also a battle between them at Zahura (on the Beas) in 1775, Ramgarhia being wounded by a shot fired by Jassa Singh so that he had to withdraw from Zahura (which was later to be given to Baghel Singh Karorsinghia).

These in themselves would not have brought about all out war. It was an incident when Jassa Singh, on a hunt was attacked by Ramgarhia's younger brothers. Jassa Singh was shot and fell unconscious and was made prisoner. Ramgarhia expressed his regrets and did his best to placate the leader of the Panth, Jassa Singh had decided to turn the Ramgarhias out of their territories- there could be only one king, and he had to be respected. Ramgarhia had simply gone too far. Other chiefs too were shocked. A confederation of Mahan Singh Suckerchakia, Jai Singh and Haqiqat Singh Kanhaiya, Jhanda and Ganda Singh Bhangi, Nar Singh Chairwala and many others came to Jassa Singh's aid. In 1776, the Ramgarhias were driven out of their territories and moved to Hansi and Hissar. Further, Gurbaks hSingh (Jai Singh Kanhaiya's son) attacked Dhasua and took it from Mali Singh, a younger brother of Ramgarhia followed by Batala in 1780. Haqiqat Singh Bhangi took Kalanaur from Tara Singh Ramgarhia.

Ganda Singh died shortly after the battle of Sundar Chak in 1774 and it was the eight year old, Desu Singh who took over the Misl! His bitterest enemy was to be Mahan Singh Suckerchakia, who succeeded Charat Singh in the same year. Mahan

Singh was to shake forever the already disrupted unity of the Misls. He was ambitious and successful but this came very much at the expense of old friendships. He wanted to conquer the whole of north west Punjab. For this he had to remove the Bhangis-his opportunity came with Desu Singh's elevation at the age of eightyone. He exploited Desu Singh's weakness, fought with him and in an engagement, killed him. Mahan Singh then expelled the Bhangi posts from Pindi, Bhattian, Sarhind, Isakhel, Muskadel and Jhang. In 1777 he entered Sialkot and attacked Kotli Loharan, famous for the manufacture of matchlocks and obtained all he needed. He then invited all the Bhangi Chiefs to meet him at a fixed time and place. 22 Chiefs came and were immediately imprisoned until they accepted him as overlord and agreed to pay tribute. He was to kill Desa Singh Chinot in 1782.

Opportunism: In the same year, there was a clash between the Bhangis and Kanhaiyas. Brij Raj Deo had become the ruler of Jammu after his fathers death in 1781. In his attempt to recover part of his territory taken by the Bhangis, he invited Haqiqat Singh Kanhaiya to help him. The Bhangis were defeated. The Kanhaiyas and Bhangis then joined up to take part of Jammu territory. With a view to helping Brij Raj Dev with territory lost to the Bhangis, Mahan Singh besieged the fort of Dinapur in Jammu. Peace was only established with the intervention of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia who came on the side of the Bhangis and Kanhaiyas. The fort was retained by Brij Raj Dev, the neighbouring territory being given to Haqiqat Singh Kanhaiya.

Delhi Conquered: In 1783, Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and Baghel Singh were to attack Delhi and its environs with 40000 troops. Jassa Singh Ramgarhia too came from Hissar with 10000 troops. Jassa Singh and Baghel Singh captured the Red Fort on the 11 th of March and while Jassa Singh was put on the throne of Delhi, the nearest the Sikhs would ever come to rule India, Ramgarhia, his old enemy strongly objected. Swords were drawn and Jassa Singh who, in any case, wanted to sit on the throne to prove a point, withdrew. He was to die in the same year at the age of 65. After him there would be no one to check the raw ambitions of some of the Chiefs - he had curbed through his personality, his position as head of both the Church and State, his diplomacy in his alliances managed to keep the fragile unity.

It was no holds barred after 1783. Bhag Singh, his grand nephew inherited both Jassa Singh Ahluwalia's disputes with the Ramgarhias, but also had to face a constant challenge from the former's sons-in-law, sometimes encouraged by the Ramgarhias. The opposition of the Ramgarhias had intensified and they used their alliance with Raja Sansar Chand Katoch of Kangra. They captured Ahluwalia territories and encouraged their Zamindars to revolt against them. Battles were fought at Nagoke, Miani, Begowal and Gardhiwal. Bhag Singh was, as under Jassa Singh, assisted by the Suckerchakias and Kanhaiyas. At the end of the century, and the beginning of the next, further battles were fought with the Ramgarhias at Mekian, Mukhala, Bhanga, Bajwara and Kehala .It was the battle of Drauli in 1804 that the Ahluwalias had a decisive victory. Jassa Singh Ramgarhia had died the previous year. A last ditch effort by the Ramgarhias ended in defeat for them at the battle of Sathiala in 1808.

Darkness Before Dawn: In 1784 Haqiqat Singh Bhangi and Mahan Singh Suckerchakia decided to loot Jammu together and this despite Mahan Singh having exchanged turbans in an act of brotherhood with Brij Raj Dev of Jammu. Mahan

Singh, in his intense desire for cash went four days ahead of his 'ally' and took one Crore rupees worth of loot. Haqiqat Singh died of shock on hearing of this treachery. Jai Singh Kanhaiya demanded half the loot but this was refused. When they met at Amritsar, Jai Singh Bhangi was to severely insult him and a state of war ensued between the two sides. Mahan Singh, Sansar Chand Katoch, ruler of Kangra, and Jassa Singh Ramgarhia (with a promise of recovering his lost territories) marched upon Batala, the headquarters of Jai Singh Kanhaiya. In the battle of Achal, Jai Singh's ablest son was shot dead which ended the battle. Jassa Singh Ramgarhia took Batala as his headquarters. Jai Singh was then to form an alliance with Sansar Chand and Mahan Singh and attack Jassa Singh Ramgarhia at Batala but without success. And so it went on and on. Mahan Singh died in 1790 at the age of 30. No one was in any doubt that had he lived he would have been king over the whole of the north west India. It was left to Ranjit Singh, the successor to Mahan Singh in the headship of the Suckerchakia Misl, who was to subdue Punjab in the beginning of the 19th century. For this he came into conflict with all the Misls so that by the end of his reign there were only two other independent kingdoms left - Kapurthala and Patiala !

[Concluded]



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