

## Guru Gobind Singh set India on Road to Freedom

January 05, marks the anniversary of birth of Guru Gobind Singhji whose advent in India marks a major milestone in man's ceaseless quest for a free, fearless and fraternal society. Let us recall here only the first half of his eventful life of two-score-and-two years.

The scene is set in Delhi's famed Chandni Chowk. The pale November sun suddenly became beclouded as a grey dust storm developed and the city square reverberated with the deafening roars of thunder. Only minutes before, the stunned multitude had witnessed a gruesome spectacle. Guru Teg Bahadur, the Ninth Guru had been put to sword by *Fatwa* under orders of the remorseless Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Close by, the ramparts of the Red Fort bore a mute testimony to the supreme sacrifice of Nanak's saintly successor, for freedom of faith and worship which a bigoted ruler had sought to crush. As the Guru's body lay bleeding, no one dared approach. But, with the dust storm raging, heedless of the danger, a pious man detached himself from the crowd of the awestruck bystanders and moved in the direction where the body lay. Now the dark clouds darkened the evening shadows. He hurriedly wrapped the dead Guru's head in his flowing robes and cautiously backed towards his bullock-cart waiting at the road's end. Soon he was out of the gates of the walled city.

**The Challenge:** After days of weary travel, this man, a rangreta calico printer by calling reached Anandpur where the young - Guru Gobind Singh had been holding daily prayers to strengthen the hearts of his followers who had laboured under the premonition of the impending tragedy. Late in the evening, when the prayers had been said, the plucky *rangreta* pressed through the congregation and hastened to the dias where the Guru was sitting. Gently he unwrapped the robes uncovering the sacred head of the Ninth Guru. The congregation watched dumbfounded.

They marvelled at the fortitude of Guru Gobind, then barely nine, and recalled how, months earlier, he had himself suggested to his Guru-Father that only the sacrifice of a great and noble soul could turn the tide of tyranny. He knew what was in store. But the grey-blue eyes of young Govind Rai moistened at the sight of his father's severed head. This singular child seemed prepared for a long and bitter struggle for freedom and against religious bigotry.

Next morning, a great funeral pyre was lit in the courtyard northwest of the palace. The spot marks the Sisganj gurdwara in Anandpur.

**The Response:** Days lengthened into months of meditation, prayer and education. The youthful-Guru made Anandpur his training ground and became known for his love of sport and combat. For a precocious child, it was no problem to pick up the elements of Farsi, Punjabi and Sanskrit literature. So keen was he on the study of epics of the past that, gradually, bands of writers, poets and men of letters started coming, attracted by that intellectual discourses that became the order of the day. The Guru would hold court in a truly royal style and threw open for learned discussion subjects ranging from Vedas and classics to contemporary literature in Braj Bhasha and Farsi. At the peak period, nearly three score poets lived in Anandpur under the patronage of the youthful Guru. During this period, he imbibed the best in the cultural heritage, the kind of learning, not always gained from books.

It was at Anandpur that the teenage Guru received homage from the young Raja of Kamrup. Ratan Rai came all the way from distant Assam to keep the word of his father, who had, years ago, played host to Guru Teg Bahadur. Indeed, it was prayers of the late Guru that blessed the old Raja with a son. Now Ratan Rai brought with him many valuable gifts, including an ingenious weapon that came to be known as the "Panchkala Shastra". But this visit is better known for the gift of a white elephant called Prasadi.

**Days of Drum:** The daily round of exercises derived special significance from the use of the *Ranjeet Nagara* - an enormous drum - which was beaten early in the morning, in *reveille*, to awaken residents of Anandpur, and again in the night to sound the curfew as the day of activity ended. This drum became the symbol of victory in the battle field and raised the spirits of the warriors by its resounding notes.

In due course, the young Guru was married in a colourful ceremony. His love of sport and weapons aroused suspicion among the hill Raja who became more and more jealous of the Guru's build-up. Among these princelings, Raja Bhim Chand of Kahlur was particularly inimical to the Guru, turning a blind eye to the fact that the transformation of peaceful disciples into dauntless warriors was directed not against the local satraps, but against the tyrannical Delhi *darbar*. Guru Govind Singh was keen to create conditions wherein Faith should flourish in freedom of the spirit. He set out to dethrone bigotry and, in the process, practically to overthrow the mighty Mughal empire with a handful of men of conviction and boundless courage.

In 1684, the Guru left Anandpur with 500 armed warriors, leaving the rest to guard the fortress. Accompanied by his mother and family, he first stopped at Kiratpur and then at Rupar, later entering Nahan, where he was received by Raja Medni Prakash of Sirmur. The Raja offered him a beautiful site for camping on the right banks of the Jamuna, nestling in the forested hills of the Dun Valley. This was the land of musk deer, of wild pomegranates, jungle fowl and the pheasant. So powerful was the attraction of the place, that the Guru built a Gurdwara on the spot and decided to stay there for some time. The place came to be known as Paonta Sahib.

**A Generous Friend:** During his stay at Paonta, the Guru brought an amicable settlement between Medni Prakash, on the one hand, and Raja Fateh Shah of Tehri Garhwal, on the other, in a long standing dispute for certain land skirting the river. As a result, Raja Fateh Shah became a devotee of the Guru. When the marriage of Raja's daughter was settled with Raja Bhim Chand's son, Ajmer Chand, Fateh Shah extended an invitation to the Guru. But knowing Raja Bhim Chand's attitude, the Guru did not wish to embarrass his friend. Instead, he sent costly gifts, valued at one and a quarter lakhs, through a band of trusted Sikhs. Also included in the gifts was a handwritten copy of the Dasam Granth. Bhim Chand, while leading the marriage party, thought of a vicious plan to capture the gifts as booty in order to humiliate the Guru. But informants were quicker, and his design was foiled by a clever manoeuvre by the Sikhs. The Dasam Granth is preserved upto this day and adorns the Gurdwara at Srinagar in Tehri Garhwal.

Pleased with Raja Medni Prakash's hospitality the Guru became much attached to him and presented him with a kirpan, This kirpan is among the valued possessions of the house of Sirmur upto this day. It bears the name of the Guru in Gurmukhi script just below the hilt. The sacred relic is carried ceremoniously once a year from the palace to the Gurdwara in Nahan to remind the people of a fruitful friendship. It is during his stay at Paonta that the Guru wrote several of his famous compositions, including the *Jaap Sahib*, *Swayyas* and the *Akal Ustati*.

**Champion of Hindu-Muslim Unity:** One of the most ardent admirers of the Guru was Sayyed Burhan-ud-din Shah of Sadhaura, in Ambala, otherwise known as Peer Budhu Shah. At the assurance of the Peer, the Guru engaged 500 Pathans who had been turned out from the Moghul army. This had roused the ire of the hill princes who saw in these war-like preparations a threat to their own security. They decided to attack the Guru and finish his power once and for all.

The resultant battle of Bhangani fought on April 16, 1687, stands out as a land mark in the

career of the Guru. Bhangani was a village seven miles from Paonta close to river Jamuna. All the hill princes mobilized their forces. They even lured away the 500 strong Pathans contingent to leave the Guru's service and join their forces. It was not difficult to persuade the mercenaries to betray the Guru. There was disappointment in the Sikh ranks. But the Guru exhorted them to have faith in the Almighty in whose service they had been called upon to fight a defensive battle.

**Victory is gift of God:** It was a matter of principle with the Guru not to attack first. So when the combined forces of the hill princes attacked him soon after the Baisakhi festival in 1687, the Guru and his disciples were prepared to face the enemy. All accounts of the battle of Bhangani are replete with the tales of matchless courage and bravery. Mahant Kirpal Das, head of Udasi sect fought the enemy with a staff. He settled accounts with Hayat Khan who had betrayed the Guru and gone over to the Rajas. Riding a horse bareback, the Mahant galloped towards Hayat Khan, dodged when Hayat Khan attacked with a sword. A second time the sword fell on his staff but was deflected out of hand and Hayat Khan stood disarmed. He wanted to turn away and gallop off. But the athletic Mahant, rising in his stirrups to full height, dealt a blow with all his strength, smashing his head. This incident, witnessed by the Guru, provoked one of the most colourful word-pictures in the narratives of the battle contained in the Bichitra Natak.

Meanwhile, Peer Budhu Shah was stung when the Pathans turned their back upon the Guru. To make amends, he and his four sons and many followers joined the Guru's forces in the nick of time. This news spread like wild-fire and raised the morale of the Sikhs to new heights. For the first time, muskets were used and volleys of fire drowned the troops of the enemy. Indeed, the enemy was taken by surprise with this persistent fire-power and began losing ground. Casualties were heavy on both sides but, under determined pressure, the hill forces finally started retreating, at first slowly and then in full flight. The Sikh troops wanted to pursue the enemy, but the Guru stopped them. As the dusk fell, he started looking after the injured. Among the dead lay two of Guru's cousins, and a son of the Muslim divine, Peer Budhu Shah.

In honour of this victory, the infant son of the Guru was named Ajit Singh. Months later, in the autumn of 1687, the Guru, now twenty-one, decided to return to Anandpur for great tasks that lay ahead. By this victory over the combined strength of a score of potentates, he had established his mettle as a leader of men, exploding the myth that might is right.

**Essence of Heroism:** Yet there was something impersonal and detached in his fight - for he was made in the classic mould of the hero as an essentially noble man created in the true image of his Creator and sharing his attributes. In Guru Gobind Singh's case, heroism cannot be confused with strength and success. He represented a far greater concept of heroism, which includes preparedness for sacrifice and death, even for failure in the conventional sense. By personal example and by sacrifice, he united the down-trodden and galvanised them into a people and, above all, gave them an identity and a purpose, and for ever demolished the fear of defeat - creating a sense of human capability that could pitch a single individual against mighty hordes.

