

Sikhs and Afghans: From Guru Nanak to Maharaja Ranjit Singh

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Part II

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Ahmad Shah Abdali and the Great Massacre (Wada Ghallughara)

In the political arena of mid 18th century Punjab there were four powers at strife of which the Sikhs were deemed to be the weakest. In the first round of this strife the Mughals were face to face with the Afghans. The invasion by Nadir (1737-39 A.D.) had completely shattered the Mughal empire. And then Ahmad Shah Abdali who invaded the Punjab repeatedly added the last back-breaking straw.

The First Invasion by Abdali 1748 A.D.

In 1745 A.D. Zakria Khan, the governor of the Punjab expired, which led to war of succession between his two sons Yahya Khan and Shah Niwaz Khan. Yahya Khan had been wedded to the daughter of Qamaruddin the minister at Delhi. Therefore, Yahya Khan was supported by Qamaruddin. Shah Niwaz Khan dauntless and gallant as he was conquered Lahore. But the Wazir Qamaruddin made him unsuccessful. So feeling weary he invited Ahmad Shah Abdali to attack Punjab. Abdali already wanted to annex some territories of the Punjab to his empire. So he led his legions to Punjab. When the Wazir Qamaruddin came to know of it, he along with myriad Mughal soldiers took a position at Manupur near Sirhind. In the battle of Manupur Abdali was put to flight. But Qamaruddin was killed in the battle. As a result of this victory Mir Mannu, the son of the Wazir Qamaruddin was appointed the governor of the Punjab. About this battle Rattan Singh Bhangu writes that Ahmad Shah Abdali first conquered Sirhind and then he measured swords with the Mughals. It is stated in the *Panth Prakash*:

The Afghan speedily occupied Sirhind and plundered the treasures. Ahmad Shah got repaired the guns lying at Sirhind. He got them assembled to fire. Qamaruddin was shot dead by its shell His son Mir Mannu was a sensible person and he did not disclose the minister's death. India then carried the day and the Afghans retreated to Kabul. After that Mir Mannu went to Lahore (as governor).¹⁶

The Second, the Third and the Fourth Invasions

This way the Sikhs were not a party during Ahmad Shah Abdali's first invasion. Abdali was defeated and he withdrew. To avenge this defeat he again invaded Punjab in 1750 and 1752. Mir Mannu who had been appointed as governor accepted him as his superior and thus the territories of Punjab, Kashmir and Sindh became subservient to the Kabul kingdom. In this manner the Sikhs also were deemed to be subordinate to the Afghans. In 1753 Mir Mannu died and his wife Mughani Begum unable to control the situation invited Ahmed Shah Abdali. This was Abdali's fourth invasion. This time after conquering areas of Lahore, Sirhind, etc. Abdali went upto Delhi. He ransacked Delhi and annexed territories upto Sirhind into his empire. This was the time when in 1757 A.D. Tamur Shah and Jahan Khan desecrated Sri Darbar Sahib. At this very time Baba Deep Singh came to Amritsar fighting the Afghans and embraced martyrdom. This battle has been described by Tahmas Khan, the page of Mir Mannu in his *Tahmas Namah*.

The Fifth Invasion and Encounter with the Marathas

Ahmad Shah Abdali's first four attacks were devoted to annihilating the Mughal power in the northern India. In his fifth invasion he had to face the Marathas in the third Battle of Panipat. When Ahmad Shah Abdali annexed Sirhind, Punjab, Multan, Sindh and Kashmir, Adeena Beg the *faujdar* of Jalandhar invited Marathas from Delhi. He invited the Sikhs to conquer Sirhind, because he knew that the Sikhs were ever-ready to invade Sirhind and owing to the martyrdom of the younger *Sahibzadas* having taken place there called it "Guru damned Sirhind" (*Guru Mari Sirhind*). This way, the Sikhs and the Marhattas captured Sirhind and later on they overran Lahore. The Abdali rule in Punjab thus came to an end. The Marathas had their sway upto Attok and they appointed Adeena Beg the governor of the Punjab.

Ahmad Shah Abdali could not tolerate the seizure of territory in the Punjab by Marathas and, therefore, he again invaded Indian with a fuller force. This was the fifth invasion by him. The Marathas also marched northwards from Deccan fully prepared. Abdali was commanding less troops, but by means of daring and superior military strategy, he carried the day against the Marathas who fell in the Battle of Panipat. Now, Abdali had one power in view, which he wanted to crush and it was the Sikhs.

Sixth Invasion the Massacre of the Sikhs - Wada Ghallughara - 1762

The destroyer of the Mughal rule and the conqueror of the Marathas considered the Sikhs to be insignificant. The Sikhs had been offended by Afghans as they had destroyed Darbar Sahib, Amritsar. When Ahmed Shah Abdali's son, Tamur Shah, and his general, Jahan Khan were returning to Kabul after ransacking Delhi, along with a lot of booty, the Sikh bands raided them seized a good quantity of plundered goods and chased the Durrani forces over a sufficient distance. It happened that in March 1757. Thereafter to wreak vengeance on the Sikhs, the Afghans attacked the town of Kartarpur (near Jalandhar) founded by Guru Arjun Sahib and set ablaze the Gurdwara Tham Sahib. On his way back from Delhi Abdali halted at Lahore where from he sent his troops to Amritsar and desecrated Sri Darbar Sahib.¹⁷

When Ahmad Shah Abdali was returning after his victory over Delhi, the Sikh bands attacked him near Goindwal and liberated about 2200 Hindu women from the clutches of the Afghans. The Sikhs bands pursued the Afghan forces upto the river Attock.¹⁸

In 1761 A.D. Ahmad Shah Abdali before leaving Lahore appointed Khwaja Ubaid the governor of Lahore and Khwaja Mirza Jaan the *faujdar* of Char Mahal (these char mahal were Sialkot, Pasroor, Gujarat and Aurangabad). Mirza Jaan was killed while fighting the Sikhs, and thereafter Ahmad Shah sent Nooruddin to establish law and order in the Punjab. He was defeated by Charat Singh Shukarchakhia and he retired to Sialkot. Hearing this, Khwaja Ubaid who the governor of Lahore gathered a large force and attacked Gujranwala, the capital city of the Shukarchakkia Misl. Charat Singh called upon the other *Misaldars* including Jassan Ahluwalia, Jai Singh Ghanayya and Hari Singh Bhangi to his aid. The assembled Sikhs put Khwaja Ubaid to fight and he fled to shelter inside the Lahore fort. The Sikh chiefs pursued him and conquered Lahore. Jassa Singh Ahluwalia made Saadat Khan *faujdar* flee. This way the Sikhs carried the day everywhere. The Sikhs decided to set right Aaqil Das Niranjania of Jandiala as he had been spying upon the Sikhs and reporting to Abdali. When Niranjani came to know of it he called Ahmed Shah Abdali to support. Zain Khan the governor of Sirhind appointed by Abdali in Cis-Sutlej area was ill-at-ease on account of the Sikhs. He also persuaded Ahmad Shah to invade the Punjab to mend the Sikhs.¹⁹

A Terrible Dream

Abdul Karim, the author of *Waquiyat Durrani* writes: "Ahmad Shah Abdali was sleeping. Suddenly he was shaken out of slumber on seeing a dreadful dream. Without informing anybody else, he took along a special force of three hundred soldiers who were on guard duty and set out towards India. While departing he sent a message to Shah Wali Khan telling him that he was going to India for a crusade (*Jehad*) and urging latter to join him soon with some fifty or sixty commandments urging the military leaders to join the king along with troops because he had left for a *Jehad*. Shah Wali Khan along with his troops joined the king and said to him, "In such a haste and without equipment your incursion into the enemy territory is not unattended by risks. Kindly unravel the mystery." In response the king said, "In a dream I met the divine prophet Hazrat Mohammad Sahib - May he be blessed - who said to me, "I have blessed you with kingship. Get up and leave for the Punjab, where at Jandiala the Sikhs are harassing the Muslims. When received this command, I did not want to make any delay in carrying out."²⁰

When Ahmad Shah Abdali reached Jandiala, he came to know that the Sikhs had left that place. Abdali stayed there for two days and learnt that the Sikhs had gone towards Sirhind and were troubling Zain Khan, the governor of Sirhind and Bhikhan Khan of Malerkotla. Abdali sent a horseman and assured Zain Khan and Bhikhan Khan that he was speedily coming to their help. Abdali reached near Malerkotla within two days and Zain Khan learnt that Ahmad Shah Abdali's forces had arrived.²¹

War Plan and the Situation

Ahmad Shah Abdali divided his forces into three sub-sections, the first under himself, the second under his minister Shah Wali Khan and the third under Jahan Khan. The troops under Shah Wali Khan were to make a detour and join the troops under Zain Khan. Abdali's and Jahan Khan's soldiers were to surround from the other sides. Thus the Sikhs were to be encircled from all sides. On the contrary the Sikhs were so situated that about fifty thousand of them had assembled near the village Kup. Their baggage and about fifty thousand women and children accompanying them were at the village Garma which was six miles away from Kup. When Ahmad Shah Abdali reached Malerkotla, the Sikhs learnt of the Afghan's arrival. At once the Sikhs advanced towards the village Garma. To checkmate them Zain Khan who was the governor of Sirhind marched forward. In this encounter, Zain Khan's vanguard commanded by Qasim Khan was badly beaten and it had to retreat. As against it, Murtaza Khan, another general of Zain Khan encountered the Sikhs and made them flee towards the village Garma.²²

In the meanwhile the Durrani in large numbers and donning red uniforms reached there. They surrounded the Sikhs from all the four sides. Rattan Singh Bhangu, the author of the *Panth Prakash* has stated:

The king sent messengers and called Zain Khan and the Pathans:

'In the morning you and we would join to kill the Singhs.'

Next morning they executed this plan, giving the Khalsa a hard time.

The Singhs moved towards the river Sohi, to be encountered by Ahmad Shah.

They saw the red uniforms of the enemies and took them for blooming flowers of Kesu (Butia Fondosa)

If the Singhs had been sensible, they would have recognised the coming Giljas.

The Giljas were joined by horsemen and the Singhs had not prepared their guns.

They fought with arrows and swords, but the attack was sudden.

Leaves on the Heads

Abdul Karim the author of *Waquiyat Durrani* writes that Ahmad Shah Abdali had sent the following message to Zain Khan the governor of Sirhind: "Since our army includes

personnel of Uzbek tribe, we have told them to kill anybody wearing Indian dress. So Zain Khan should order everyone in his army to wear leaves of trees or blades of grass on their heads, lest the Uzbek soldiers should kill them during the fighting taking them for enemy personnel.”²³ Abdali passed orders to his own forces that anybody with leaves of a tree or blades of grass on his head might be regarded as Zain Khan’s soldier. This incident shows that there was not much difference between the habiliments of the Sikhs and those of the Afghans which necessitated wearing of a mark of leaves on the head by the latter.

The Khalsa planned that four Sikhs should be sent to Garma with the instructions that the horde comprising children and women should head towards Barnala. Consequently four Sikhs namely Sandhu Singh, Ala Singh, Sekhu Singh and Buddha Singh led the caravan.²⁴ But they had hardly covered a short distance when 8,000 Afghans under Shah Wali Khan assaulted them. Jassa Singh Ahluwalia sent more Singhs as reinforcement and then the Sikhs combatted Afghans of Malerkotla and Zain Khan as has been described by Rattan Singh Bhangu:

The caravan had gone two or three Kos where the fores raided it. Zain Khan and

Malaria rushed to kill them.

Sham Singh said to the Khalsa

That he would take care of Zain Khan and Malaria.

*And that you all attend to the remaining three sides considering it to be a crusade.*²⁵

The Sikhs were now fleeing as well as fighting and the Afghan forces were chasing them. As per Dr. Hari Ram Gupta, Abdali’s forces were adept in the use of arms and the art of war. From the military viewpoint the Sikhs had neither full scale of weapons nor tactical training which could stand them in good stead in face to face fighting. But they fought zealously and were ready to sacrifice their all in the name of the Guru. At last Shukar-Chakkia Chief S. Charat Singh grandfather of Ranjit Singh said to them with a warning:

*Then Charat Singh said, “Listen to my suggestion. Just as the king has organised his troops, you also make misls to fight. Organise four gigantic misls and deploy two on either side. If a side pressed hard, I shall come to its rescue.”*²⁶

Rattan Singh has given a vivid description of the battle of Massive Massacre:

Then two more hordes joined. Baland Khan and Zain Khan joined.

They shook the Singhs in such a way as wind makes the leaves of Peepal fly.

They fought, fled and returned to fight. The Gilijas were numerous and the Singhs could not be effective.

The Singhs fought intermittently and protected the caravan.

*Then Ahmad Shah attacked from behind. Still the Singhs kept fighting, intent on protecting the sometimes they stood and fought and sometimes they ran caravan away.*²⁷

In this battle the Singhs fought and fled, and took possession of horses and weapons of the Afghans killed by them. Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and Charat Singh took an active part in this battle. Rattan Singh so showers praises on Charat Singh:

Charat Singh’s gun made him famous the world over,

He could target the enemy from near as well as far off place.

While the Singhs were fighting against the forces of Ahmad Shah Abdali, Zain Khan and Malerkotla, they halted enroute at a village named Gehl to fresh their breath but in vain. Next there was another village named Qutb Bahmani. This village had a pond of water where first the Sikhs and then the Afghans quenched their thirst. In the way there was

nowhere water for men and horses. The Afghans had now got tired, fighting since early morning. Many of them had been killed also in this battle. So, Abdali did not deem it proper to pursue the Sikhs any further.

Contemporary, semi contemporary and subsequent historians greatly differ on the number of Singh martyred in this massacre. It is generally estimated that from ten to thirty thousand Sikhs embraced martyrdom in this massacre. But usually it is supposed that those who were martyred were 20,000.²⁸ Rattan Singh has mentioned them as 30,000.

The people say that the Sikhs were one lakh in all.

Fifty thousand survived and the rest were killed.

My father put the figure at thirty thousand.

So many died and the others survived.

All the chiefs were wounded; none was without injury.

*Many of them were martyred; they were beyond a count.*²⁹

Ahmad Shah Abdali presumed that he had so punished the Sikhs that their generations would remember and so large of them had been killed that Sikh spirit would end. But the Sikhs had always been facing adversities. They deemed this critical time also as a trial by the Almighty. Just as gold gets purified in the crucible, in the same way the Khalsa assumed that the impurities had been washed away and the pure Khalsa had survived. Rattan Singh states:

A Nihang roared and said aloud

*The pure Khalsa has survived and the impure been lost.*³⁰

This event is known in Sikh History as “Wada Ghallughara” the great massacre of Sikhs.

End of Part II

(to be concluded)

References

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