

Meteoric Rise & Fall of Baba Banda Singh Bahadur*

Some Unanswered Questions

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© A Paper presented at the Punjab History Conference held at Punjabi University, Patiala in March 2004. The variant versions about the life and times of Baba Banda Singh Bahadur have been discussed in **The Sikh Review** from time to time. The author recalls his own views published in SR circa 1987 - which had been questioned by eminent scholars Dr. Kharak Singh and Dr. Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon, as also (in a letter to the editor) by Dr. Kirpal Singh.

BANDA BAHADUR CAME IN HISTORY like a meteor that shook the foundation of the great Mughal empire, and his appearance gave a new direction to the Sikh movement. All accounts about him assume that he was deputed on his mission to Punjab by Guru Gobind Singh whom he met at Nanded some time in the middle of 1708 C.E. Guru Gobind Singh merged his being in the Khalsa on the seventh October 1708. There is no *hukumnama* of Guru Gobind Singh available to confirm that Banda Bahadur came to Punjab with his blessings on a mission assigned to him by the Guru. Historians have assumed from his achievements that he came to Punjab with proper authorization from Guru Gobind Singh which made the Sikhs flock to his banner. There are, however, a few questions which come to my mind for which I would like the historians to help me in finding an answer.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji established the Khalsa order on Vaisakhi of 1699 and he himself got "baptized" from the first Five Beloved Ones who had offered their heads on his call to the congregation. The Sikh tradition is that, after 1699, the Guru himself became a Sikh and the fact finds confirmation in the Var of Bhai Gurdas second "*Wah Wah Guru Gobind Singh - Aape gur chela*", or, hail to Guru Gobind Singh who himself is the Guru and the follower both. Thereafter, the Guru initiated the practice of the Five Beloved Ones (*panj piaras*) exercising the authority of the Guru in all matters. It is said that when Guru Gobind Singh saluted the *samadhi* of Dadu, the Five Beloved Ones among the Sikhs with him took a note of it and awarded 'punishment' to him, which the Guru gladly accepted.

By all accounts the Guru did not appoint any successor Guru, and merged his Being in the Khalsa. He directed that those who desire to see him can see him in the Khalsa, and those who seek his guidance can seek the same from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Another feature to be noted is that the Guru was always accompanied by the *panj piaras*. His two wives, his mother and his two younger sons got separated from him in the battle on the banks of Sarsa, but the five beloved ones remained in his company in the battle of Chamkaur in which his two sons and three of the *panj piaras* died fighting. Bhai Daya Singh and Bhai Dharam Singh who were the first and second to offer their heads on the call of the Guru, remained with Guru Gobind Singh all through to Nanded. They later died in Nanded and their *samadhis* are located at Nanded and they did not accompany Banda Bahadur to Punjab. As a matter of fact *panj piaras* do not figure in any of the available accounts about Banda Bahadur except a mention that he was asked by Guru Gobind Singh that he had to conduct himself as per the guidance of *panj piaras*. But we do not come across any

mention about *panj piaras* having been consulted in any of the crucial decisions taken by Banda Bahadur may it be any specific military action or introduction of 'Fateh Darshan' and the change of the dress code.

There is no historical record from which one could fix the date on which Madho Das, the well known Bairagi Sadhu with a reputation of enjoying great *tantric* powers met Guru Gobind Singh for the first time. His date of departure from Nanded to Punjab is based on conjecture, being shown as earlier than seventh October 1708, in view of the fact that thereafter it cannot be shown that he had come to Punjab with the blessings of Guru Gobind Singh. The only historical certainty is that Banda Bahadur made his appearance around Sonapat, Haryana, in November 1709 and after ravaging various small towns he attacked and ravaged Samana on 11th November 1709. Thereafter, the storm that was Banda Bahadur took every thing that came before it till they conquered Sirhind on 14th May 1710. Banda Bahadur in the sack of Sirhind was joined by the Sikhs from all over Punjab.

The first point that strikes one about the mission of Banda Bahadur having been authorized by Guru Gobind Singh is that this authorization is contrary to what Guru Gobind Singh had been projecting about the Khalsa and the Panj Piaras after the Baisakhi of 1699. Even in his last testament he had empowered the Panj Piaras to invoke him, in presence of the SGGS through *ardas*, to seek his guidance on any issue that the Khalsa Panth may be facing. How could it be that for his mission to Punjab he would authorize a recent convert in preference to the two of the original Panj Piaras who were with him at Nanded?

We do not have any *hukamnama* of the Guru, or of Banda Bahadur, that could throw light on the nature of the mission assigned to Banda Bahadur. There are two *hukamnamas* of Banda Bahadur in the "Compilation of *Hukamnamas*" by Dr. Ganda Singh. Banda Bahadur has asked for armed assistance in both, but in the *hukamnama* addressed to the *sangat* of Jaunpur dated 12th December, 1710 Banda Bahadur had stated that he had brought about *Satyuga*. Guru Gobind Singh in his *hukamnama* to the *sangat* of Dhaul on 2nd October, 1707 made a mention of the robe of honour and other gifts given to him by the Emperor Bahadur Shah, and also of the fact that he was engaged in negotiations with the Emperor which seemed to be proceeding well and he had stated that, thereafter, he would come to Kahlur, or Anandpur Sahib, where he asked the *sangat* of Dhaul to come fully armed.

We can, in this context, refer to the "*zafarnama*," or the epistle of victory, addressed to Aurangzeb. Guru Gobind Singh in this letter mainly deploras the treachery committed by royal officers when believing in the oath on Quran of the Emperor; he had vacated Anandpur but his officers and the hill chieftains in violation of the oath on Quran, had launched an all out attack to capture or to kill him, but the same Allah in whose name the false oath was taken protected the Guru, as Allah protected all believers. He had put Aurangzeb to shame, saying that despite his professions to the contrary, the Emperor did not believe in Allah, and he reminded that the primary duty of a ruler was to ensure justice for his subjects.

We can conjecture from the above about the mission of Banda Bahadur. One can assume that, after the sack of Sirhind, the mission if it was assigned by Guru Gobind Singh was completed. It seems that Majha Sikhs, Baba Deep Singh and Damdama Sahib Sikhs and the ancestors of Patiala family went back, leaving Banda Bahadur

fighting to establish Khalsa Raj. This action of the older Khalsa also goes against the generally held view that Banda Bahadur was appointed a leader of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh.

It is assumed that Banda Bahadur started from Nanded on horse back with a small group of Hazuri Sikhs; yet he took more than one year to reach environs of Sonapat. The reason for so much time taken that has been advanced is that he adopted circuitous routes in order to evade Mughal surveillance can not stand scrutiny. Guru Gobind Singh, while on way to Deccan, was inviting Sikhs to join him and, as was the practice, groups of Sikhs must have been coming and going to Punjab on way back, so a group of 20 or 25 Sikhs with Banda Bahadur would not have attracted special attention on the way. The delay can be explained only if we assume that Banda Bahadur had left on his mission most probably on the first anniversary of the demise of Guru Gobind Singh, i.e. around 7th October 1709.

We could have a look at the scenario at Nanded. The Gurus camp must have consisted of more than two thousand persons. We know that there were some negotiations going on between the Guru and the Emperor Bahadur Shah when the Guru breathed his last. The camp of the Guru can not be assumed to have broken up the next day. Historians have noted that on the ground that he was not yet firmly in grip of the Imperial power, the Emperor dragged his feet and prolonged the negotiations till the death of Guru Gobind Singh so that he did not make the Governor of Sirhind and his party at his court turn inimical to him. Similarly he avoided turning the hill chiefs against him and he kept Guru Gobind Singh out of Punjab.

The Sikhs have a tradition of chastising all those who go for harming the *persona* of the Gurus or their families. It was Guru Amar Das Ji who, as the third Guru, denounced a misguided and jealous '*tapa*' and had him punished by village panchayat because he had misled them into evicting the Guru merely for being a "householder" whose presence was responsible for long spell of drought in the village. The '*tapa*' was paraded and dragged about - an ordeal - to which he succumbed. The Guru was honourably brought back. Similarly, Chandu Shah who was considered to have been responsible for poisoning the mind of Jahangir against Guru Arjun Dev was meted out a severe punishment by the Sikhs after he was handed over to Guru Hargobind by the Emperor Jahangir and the Guru did not stop the Sikhs from chastising Chandu Shah in a manner considered appropriate by them.

Tired of further negotiations, it must be in this tradition that Banda Bahadur and his group of warriors must have proposed for settling the scores by force of arms. No one knew Banda Bahadur outside the Hazoori *sangat* at Nanded. The *Hazoori sangat* among them had Bhalla and Trehan sahibzadas, descendants of the second and the third Gurus who were well known in Punjab. Apparently, they threw their lot with Banda Bahadur, but not Bhai Daya Singh or Dharam Singh, two of the first Panj Piaras.

Guru Gobind Singh was no longer among the Sikhs and a year had elapsed. The Khalsa themselves collectively became the Guru's Darbar. They had witnessed the *tantric* powers of Banda Bahadur against whom none among them could prevail. Guru Gobind Singh was the only one against whom Banda Bahadur could do

nothing. He therefore, accepted Guru Gobind Singh as his master. When Banda Bahadur offered to lead the Sikhs, the conditions that are said to have been imposed on him by Guru Gobind Singh, like remaining celibate, always to go by the advice of the *Panj Piaras*, and never to stake claim to Guruship must have been imposed by the Sikh, collectively, who agreed to accompany him, among them being the respected Trehan and Bhalla sahibzadas. Madho Das, on his part, must have agreed to be the servant of the Khalsa, or "Banda", to assure the Khalsa that he would not stake his claim as a pretender to the office of the Guru.

It is to be noticed that excesses against Guru Gobind Singh were committed in 1704 and, on their own, the Sikhs had done nothing to avenge those excesses till the end of 1709. They started flocking to the call of Banda Bahadur on hearing from the Hazoori Sikhs, like Binod Singh, Kahan Singh and Baj Singh, etc. The early successes of Banda Bahadur brought to him a large following which was exclusively his own.

It is worth mentioning that later action of Baba Deep Singh Shaheed in avenging the sacrilege of Darbar Saheb by Durranis was of similar nature. Baba Deep Singh, moved by the accounts concerning Darbar Saheb, decided to lay down his life if he failed to liberate Darbar Saheb. When he reached the outskirts of Amritsar he is said to have drawn a line for his companions asking only those to cross the line who were ready as he was to lay down their lives, and he did lay down his life in this mission.

The above 'reconstruct' of events, to the author, sounds more plausible than the current belief about Banda Bahadur. We find that in the recently published book edited by our reputed historian J.S.Grewal, "***Sikh History from Persian Sources***" about Banda Bahadur and most of the accounts are of contemporary observers. But nowhere is it said that Banda Bahadur had his mission assigned to him by Guru Gobind Singh. One, Mohammad Shafi almost endorses the above reconstruct of this writer. "[Assasination of Guru Gobind Singh at the hands of an Afghan at Nander]-]. Owing to the occurrence of this sudden event, the leaders of his community (*khulafa-i-Millat-ash*) consulted among themselves, and, after making satisfactory preparations, sent off to Hindostan, a 'conjurer' who had great identity of appearance with that man [Guru Gobind Singh], on a mischievous [lit. fruitless, ignorant] errand..They sent letters to the zamindars of the territories of the Punjab and Hindostan, who to his circle of believers, that Guru Gobind, while in the army of the Emperor, had died at the hands of an Afghan, but according to his will, in a short while, he will, through the transmigration of his soul, wear the robe of honour of sovereignty, reappearing afresh as a living person. In this situation it is proper that every one should raise the banner of independence[from Mughal rule] and recognizing obedience to him as the source of worldly wealth and the means of eternal salvation,not allow delay or reflection to occur in contributing money,goods and property. After the perusal of these letters every person in his village began to wait most anxiously for the coming of that cruel deceiver. Then, all of a sudden, he declared his presence in the township of Kharkhoda...Its zamindar, who a few years earlier than this, had gone to visit Guru Gobind Singh and had knowledge of his appearance and manners, dedicated himself wholeheartedly to the obedience of that conjurer, who had made himself similar in appearance to him. He carried the news of his coming to the Sikhs in all directions."

There is one serious flaw in the currently accepted view about Banda Bahadur. The Sikhs rightly believe that the lives of the Sikh Gurus reflect the teachings of Gurbani, i.e. whatever was *latent* in Gurbani was made *patent* by the Gurus in living their lives. One of the cardinal values emphasized in *Gurbani* is the integrity of word and deed. Guru Gobind Singh Ji in his letter (*Zafarnamah*) to Aurangzeb, accused him of “duplicity” for having one thing in the mouth and the opposite in his heart. When we say that having come to the end of his patience, Guru Gobind Singh too decided to send Banda Bahadur to chastise those who were guilty of committing excesses, we indirectly make Guru Gobind Singh Ji commit the same vengeful “duplicity”, which is wholly uncharacteristic of the Guru’s divine attributes.

All traditional Sikh accounts about Banda Bahadur confirm that there came about a split in the Khalsa. The followers of Banda Bahadur formed a separate group. They adopted ‘*fateh darshan*’, in place of ‘*waheguru ji ki fateh*’ given by Guru Gobind Singh Ji. They adopted a slightly modified design of the ‘kachh’, or breeches, which went down well below the knee. They started wearing red in place of the blue worn by the Khalsa. They recognized Banda Bahadur as some one who was addressed as ‘*sacha sahib*’. They did not leave Banda Bahadur even when a *hukamnama* to that effect was issued by Mata Sundari Ji from Delhi. Mata Sundari and Mata Sahib Devi had moved to Delhi after the battle of Sirsa, apparently with the approval of Guru Gobind Singh, because later, after joining Guru Gobind Singh, they would again and again return to Delhi, where both of them died. Mata Sundari was recognized by the Khalsa as a counsellor in all serious issues affecting the Sikhs. Jassa Singh Ahluwalia had gone to become leader of the Khalsa from Mata Sundari to Nawab Kapur Singh. The management of Amritsar was entrusted by her to Bhai Mani Singh. It was she who asked the Khalsa for their bi-annual get-togethers to be held at Amritsar, instead of Delhi, so far, when her adopted son, Ajit Singh started having pretensions of taking the place of the Guru.

Somehow, I find it difficult to accept what the famous historian Dr. Ganda Singh did, in dismissing all this tradition coming with slight variations in all the old Sikh accounts of this period. It seems that Banda Bahadur after tasting success in the battle-field wanted to go to establish Khalsa Raj, but Mata Sundari while endorsing the blessing of Guru Gobind Singh on the Khalsa, ‘*hane hane miri*’, i.e. every horseman becoming a ruler, advised realism and patience to the Khalsa, and to accept ‘*jagiri*’ offered by the Mughal government. The Trehan Sahibzadas who had come with Banda Bahadur also accepted the advice of Mata Sundari. It is significant that, despite his travails, Banda Bahadur did not change ‘*Fateh Darshan*’ nor the dress code and, in the last procession in Delhi of Banda Bahadur and his followers, they were described as singing *shabads* and shouting ‘*Fateh Darshan*’. It seems that he did not make a bid to be the Guru after Guru Gobind Singh. But in the background of his achievements, he expected the Khalsa to accept his innovations as adopting a palpably *vaishnav* code for eating, and his special position of *sacha saheb* who could sit on a *masnad* in the congregation and discarding the *panj piara* system which the ‘*Tat Khalsa*’ had strictly followed all through. It is also worth pondering that Northern India was under Sikh domination for about a hundred years after Banda Bahadur, yet, there was no practice of celebrating or observing any day in the memory of Banda Bahadur, till recently. No Gurdwara was raised to commemorate his victories or debacles.

His last words as quoted in "*Siyarul ul Muntakhrine*", were: "Whenever men become so corrupt and wicked as to relinquish the sense of equity and abandon themselves to all kinds of excesses, then the Providence never fails to raise up a scourge like me to chastise a race so depraved; but when the measure of punishment is full, then He raises up men like you to bring him to punishment." These lines also lend support to the view that such mandate - or mission - was not given to him by Guru Gobind Singh Ji.

I have placed here my doubts about the currently accepted view that Banda Bahadur was assigned the mission to come to Punjab by Guru Gobind Singh Ji and my reasons for holding those views. I would urge historians to have an in-depth look at all the material that could be available on this issue.

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