

Rise and fall of Banda Singh Bahadur

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IN INDIAN HISTORY IN GENERAL, and the Sikh history in particular, Baba Banda Singh Bahadur has not been given his due status, or respect, by the historians. One of the reasons is that Rattan Singh Bhangu, the first Sikh historian, wrote a lot on the basis of heresay in "*Panth Prakash*" which denigrated the status of Banda. Bhangu argues that Banda's success was because of witchcraft, black magic, sorcery and occultism. He admits that his version of Banda Bahadur is based on what he had heard from the elders of his period. Therefore, its authenticity stands challenged. The same ideas were repeated by Kesar Singh Chhiber, Santokh Singh, Giani Gian Singh, Khazan Singh, Karam Singh historian, Kartar Singh Kalaswalia etc. The Mughal writers like Khafi Khan, Ghulam Mohyy-ud din, S.M.Latif speak in a derogatory way of Banda Singh Bahadur. Akhbar-i-Darbar-i-Mualla and Asrar-i-Samadi speak ill of Banda Singh Bahadur. Max Arthur Macauliffe and J.D.Cunningham also use the same ideology though in brief.

Assingation:

In the middle of September, 1708, Guru Gobind Singh Ji conferred the title of 'Bahadur' on Banda. He was assigned an advisory council of five Sikhs, though historians differ on about their names. In addition, several body guards were also deputed. In Punjab, the Sikhs were greatly distressed over the summary execution of Guru Teg Bahadur, beheading of the two younger sons of Guru Gobind Singh and the death of Mata Gujri in the captivity of the Mughal Faujdar of Sirhind Wazir Khan who had perpetuated other atrocities on the Sikhs.

Banda travelled a long journey of 1600 kms in one year to reach the out skirts of Delhi. It appears that he travelled in disguise and by circuitous routes in order to avoid the Mughal army as well as spies. Rajasthan and Maharashtra were his much travelled regions as these were in revolt against the Mughals.

Shocked by the decimation of followers of Satnami sect at Narnaul, Banda's troops captured the Mughal treasury and distributed the spoils among his followers and people at Bhiwani. He conquered Hissar, Tohana and Kaithal. Banda's uprising was strongly supported by the Sikhs who participated in the fights against the Mughals under the leadership of Guru Gobind Singh. The young Sikhs also enthusiastically helped Banda as they saw the atrocities being committed on the Sikhs irrespective of their age and sex by the Mughals.

Samana Subdued:

Samana was the next target of Banda. This place was infamous as Jalal-ud-Din, the executioner of Guru Tegh Bahadur; Bachel Beg who beheaded Guru Gobind Singh's younger sons at Sirhind and Ali Husain who, by false promises, had persuaded Guru Gobind Singh to evacuate Anandpur Sahib, belonged to this place. This accursed place was looted by the army of Banda. His forces occupied Kunjpura, Ghuram, Thaska, Shahbad Markanda and Kapuri. Sadhaura were razed to the ground. The ultimate aim of Banda Singh Bahadur was to punish Wazir Khan and destroy infamous Sirhind. The battle of

Sirhind was fought at Chapar Chiri on May 12, 1710. In this bloody battle, Wazir Khan was killed. His son and son-in-law also perished. Khafi-Khan writes that in the course of flight not a man of his army of Islam escaped with more than his life and the clothes he stood in. On May 13, 1710, the Sikh army entered the city of Sirhind and there ensued a large scale destruction and murder of Muslims. Indignation of Sikh forces for this city was beyond any description.

Emancipation:

According to *Futuh-at-Namah-i-Samadhi* the 'Sikh struggle under Banda Singh Bahadur was not a localized affair but a widespread movement, as is clear from: Firstly, people all over the hills and the plains had risen in revolt. Secondly, the ramification of the uprising had reached as far as Iran, Turan, Qandhar, Multan and neighbouring climes and countries. Hindus from these regions converged on the Punjab to join hands with Banda to expel the Mughals from the land. Such a profuse, spontaneous and voluntary response to Banda's call for a struggle for emancipation highlights the seriousness of the situation which the Mughals had to face in the Punjab: 'Their dislike was for Wazir Khan. They wanted to replace the Mughals and rule themselves. Once Wazir Khan was murdered their ambitions increased and they ruled over a large area with their own officials. Myth of invulnerable and impenetrable Mughal authority which was built during the last 200 hundred years was no more. The terror of the Mughal sovereignty ended and the Hindus started coming to Punjab from different regions with the beat of the drum.'

Liberation:

With spectacular display of heroism, an impressive independent sovereign Sikh state was established. Ghulam Mohyy-ud-Din wrote that the Sikhs erected a big wooden tower in Thanesar which touched the western boundary of the Delhi Empire, was a signal of an undisputed ownership. It was called a 'Khamba' by Indian warriors. Thanesar was important for battles between invaders and Indian rulers. Moreover, it was on the main road. After seven hundred years, and disappearance of the rule of Hindushahi, it was the first time that an Indian established kingship through meteoric heroism. Banda considered Khalsa as the creator of the emancipated Punjab. He believed in moral values in the conduct of social life.

Destination Delhi:

Before Bahadur Shah's arrival in Delhi Banda had occupied the entire region of Sirhind, several areas of Hissar and had invaded certain areas of Saharanpur in the Jamuna-Ganga Doab. Sikh uprising was also witnessed in Bist Jalandhar and Upper Bari Doab. In fact, the entire area between Satluj and Jamuna was under his command. He made Mukhlispur's fort as his capital with a new name of Lohgarh. He also issued a new coin in the name of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh. Banda Singh Bahadur's army consisted of zamindars, peasantry and lower classes. This concept has been well described by Rattan Singh Bhangu in his "Panth Prakash".

Local Chieftains:

Muzaffar Alam's view that the Sikh zamindars withdrew their support to Banda Bahadur is not based on contemporary sources. He further writes that non-zamindars and Khatri too followed the same. In fact, Banda had a strong base of zamindars. Within a short period he had a strong army. Muzaffar Alam forgets that the Khalsa Panth was founded in 1699. Within a very short period of a few years the Sikhs became armed and capable enough to fight against the imperial forces of the Mughal Empire and foreign invaders. Banda was so

powerful that he was in the capacity to block the army and traders going towards Delhi from Lahore. Zamindars of Kharkhauda welcomed the arrival of Banda from Nanded.

Circumstances favourable to Sikh uprising:

Towards the last years of Aurangzeb's reign (1658-1707) the conflict between imperial authority and certain groups of the nobility began to reappear, though in a very different form. Religious policy, Zajiya system, desecration and destruction of Hindu temples, had already alienated the Hindus from the Mughal government. Bahadur Shah (1707-12) thus inherited a difficult situation. In order to maintain a balance he was less interested in promoting the interests of the members of the old and established families and favoured high positions for the relatively new and obscure elements. Dissatisfaction prevailed in most of the family groups of the nobility. Because of this reason, uprisings assumed serious dimensions. Nobles were dissatisfied for the deductions from their emolument for feeding the royal animals. Even the emperor's orders for assignment of jagirs and mansab had become ineffective. During the seventeenth century the Jagirdar's military power had declined and the intermediaries steadily gained in power. The rise in strength of the intermediaries further jeopardised the income of the smaller jagirdars who expressed their anguish by disregarding the state regulations even in and around the imperial centre.

Famine and Zamindar uprisings:

During the reign of Farrukh Siyar (1713-19) two famines occurred in the very beginning of his kingship. These famines were so severe that there was a great loss of animals and people. Moreover, a widespread epidemic raged in the wake of famine. Shortage of water, scarcity of food and milk and the resultant epidemic took lives of thousands of people and animals. In fact, there was nothing near the towns except the human skeletons or heaps of bones. What to speak of common people even the troopers died for want of food and water. Prices of the food grains became more than double. To purchase food articles was out of the reach of common persons.

Because of such conditions there was great resentment among the Zamindars. Their rising discontentment was very helpful to the Sikh struggle. The traders moving on the Grand Trunk road even in caravans were not safe. Number of thieves and bandits increased day by day because of turbulent conditions and lack of employment.

Mughal administration and Punjab:

Condition of local and provincial administration was worse because of different reasons. Mughal chronicles and administrators treated the Sikh Gurus and the rising of the Sikhs as unlawful. The origin of the intolerance on the part of Sikhs starts from the fifth Sikh Guru. However, the mughal emperors, nobles and landlords were utterly confused on the increasing number of followers of the Sikh religion. Mughals failed to understand that they are outsiders and cannot suppress the struggle of the local people for a just cause. Martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur, killing of the two innocent sons of the tenth Guru, death of Mata Gujri and role of Wazir Khan's men in physically harming the Tenth Master cannot be forgotten by any Sikh.

Political Scenario:

Aurangzeb, who died in 1707 at Ahmadnagar, left a widespread kingdom ranging from Kabul to Carnatic which he controlled and occupied through treacherous ways. His son Bahadur Shah with a bent of mind to Shia faith faced the uprising of Banda Singh Bahadur, but failed to control it. Bahadur Shah suffered from fainting fits and died of it. Jahandar

Shah who ruled for about one year was an inefficient ruler, indolent, effeminate, licentious, fond of ease and slave of dancing girls, was less concerned with the turbulent conditions of his kingdom. There was revolt of Farukhseer and Jahandar Shah ran away in disguise but was captured by his old wazir Asad-ud-Daula. Jahandar Shah's head was stuck on a spear and carried through the most frequented parts of the city on an elephant with the body of the late emperor thrown across the animal. Farukhseer was weak, timid, destitute of morals and capacity. Although during his reign Banda Singh Bahadur was captured and executed yet the empire did not prosper under his rule. The King, who brutally murdered Banda Singh Bahadur and his Sikhs, also died a tragic death. The captors made the king blind and tortured him a lot. Thus the political scene was full of conspiracies, groupism and killings.

Undoubtedly, the happenings in and beyond Kabul and Qandhar, turmoil and disturbances in Persia and activities in Central Asia greatly affected the fate of Punjab during the eighteenth century.

Albeit Banda Singh Bahadur was slain in 1715, alongwith 800 Sikhs, yet their fight continued throughout the 18th century and it culminated in the establishment of Sikh rule.

With limited army, ammuniton and finance, Banda challenged the Mughal authority and avenged the killings of the Tenth Master's parents and his sons by finishing Wazir Khan. For North India, he was a national hero and for the Sikhs the empire builder. His achievements are no less than that of Alexander the Great, or Napoleon Bonaparte.



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