

The Sikh Forays into Medieval Delhi

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DELHI HAS BEEN THE CENTER AS WELL as the focus of political activities from the times immemorial. In the epic period, it was the headquarters of the Kurus, and it was here that they planned their strategic templates against the Purus. Then it was known as Indraprastha. In the Mauryan period, Raja Dhilu rebuilt it and named it Delhi after his own name. For a very long time after the Mauryan period, Delhi did not find mention in the annals of India. Understandably, it did not play any significant part, although it was a witness to the rise and fall of different monarchies/republics emerging and then crashing at different places in the country some time under the weight of the invaders from across the northwestern frontiers, and, at times, under the impact of their own contradictions. Even in the time of its relative eclipse, it continued to occupy a niche in the innermost recesses of the hearts of the people because tradition had made it a symbol of authority and splendor of Aryavarta.

In the twelfth century, Delhi shot into prominence as it became the capital of Chauhan ruler, Prithviraj. Under the Sultanate, right up to the invasion of Timur, it enjoyed this exalted status. In the later half of the fourteenth century, the last of the Sultan kings changed his capital to Agra. Babur, the first Mughal Emperor, re-established Delhi as the seat of his empire in 1526. It experienced a temporary diminution in its importance when the Mughal Emperors, Akbar and Jahangir, moved their headquarters to Fatehpur Sikri and Agra, but the city regained its glory when Shah Jahan made it the headquarter of his empire and, since then, it has enjoyed the status of being the headquarter of Indian government. Nearly continuous holding of high status developed a sort of mystique about Delhi and people began to believe that Master of Delhi is *Ishwara*, the Omnipotent, and its occupation was symbolic of hegemony of the occupation over the whole of the country.

Understandably political aspirants seeking all India recognition aspired for the occupation of Delhi. The Sultan, the Mughals, the Marathas, Jats and Rajputs, all made attempts to occupy Delhi. The Sikhs too desired to possess Delhi or to have dominant voice in Delhi affairs.

Historic Compulsion: In the case of the Sikhs, there were certain other propellant factors. It was the Delhi Emperor Jahangir who had conspired to bring about the martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev and later imprisoned Guru Hargobind in the fort of Gwalior. Aurangzeb hatched conspiracies to breed schism among the Sikhs. Guru Gobind Singh had to suffer a lot at the hands of the Mughal Emperor, to save his new dispensation. According to one historical reckoning, Guru Gobind Singh did not die a natural death; he was killed by the Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah, through a hireling. For a very long time, after the death of Banda Singh Bahadur, Sikhs suffered persecutions and massacres under the orders of the Mughal subedars of the Punjab. Even after the end of the Mughal rule in Punjab, the suffering of the Sikhs did not end. The Mughal Emperors at Delhi, now at the instance of the deputy of Ahmad Shah Abdali, did not change their attitude towards the Sikhs. Against their perspective, it was but natural that the Sikhs were scornful towards Delhi.

In January 1764, the Sikhs attacked Sirhind and killed its Afghan governor, Zain Khan, in the battle at Manhara about seven miles to the east of Sirhind. The city of Sirhind was sacked and the whole Sarkar of Sirhind was parceled among different Sikh Sardars. Taruna Dal returned to the north of the Sutlej in the Trans-Sutlej areas to defeat Sa'adat Khan, the Faujdar of Jalandhar Doab, and to establish control on Lahore.

Declines of Mughals: By this time, the Mughal Empire at Delhi had touched its nadir. According to Percival Spear, "the Mughal Empire as an Imperial power may be said to have ended in the trouble of the years 1759-61. The Marathas' wars of the Turks undermined the imperial structure but did not overthrow it. Nadir Shah's invasion was a great blow and the Empire survived it. The Mughals even registered their last great victory in 1748 at Sirhind over the Afghans. It was only after 1752 that the rat within had so eaten away the strength of the Empire that it was incapable of withstanding next shock from without. The Civil War between the rival Wazirs Safdar Jang of Awadh and Gaazi-uddin Imad-ul-Mulk in 1753 had almost paralyzed the Empire for defense and for giving good governance to the people."

Out of this Civil War, Imad-ul-Mulk came out victorious while his rival receded to Awadh. Even after that, the affairs at Delhi remained unsettled. Imad-ul-Mulk murdered Emperor Alamgir II in 1759. The Emperor's heir, Murza Abdullah, Ali Gauhar, fearing his ruin thought it appropriate to seek shelter in flight to Awadh where he, after his father's murder, declared himself Emperor under the title of Shah Alam III. In 1756, Ahmed Shah Abdali attacked Delhi and plundered it comprehensively. Najib Uddaula, an Afghan soldier of fortune and determination, had sided with Imad-ul-Mulk during the Civil War and the latter rewarded him with jagirs in upper Doab. Gradually, in the fashion of his time, he extended his power by seizing many villages in the Saharanpur and Meerath districts. Shortly after, Najib developed reservations for Imad for his arbitrariness and unscrupulousness and was tempted to side with Ahmed Shah Abdali who had plundered to establish his dominance at Delhi. In 1756, when he attacked Delhi, Imad could not muster courage to face him as he could not mobilize support either from local chieftains, or from Awadh, or from Najib who clandestinely had extended support to Ahmed Shah Abdali. Muhammad Shah, contemptuously called 'Rangila' (literally meaning a person engrossed in luxury) had to offer his submission to him when Imadul Mulk or any one else could muster courage to fight against the invader. Ahmed Shah Abdali occupied Delhi, got *Khutba* read in his name, and divested the nobility of their valuables. Imad-ul-Mulk was forced to part with his wealth. The Emperor had to surrender his valuables; even ladies of his *harem*, including his granddaughter.

On Ahmad Shah Abdali's retreat in April 1757, Najib was left in charge of Delhi and the emperor Imad-ul-Mulk, not withstanding his humiliation at the hands of Ahmed Shah Abdali, was glad to accept *Wazarit*. Even with this arrangement, peace did not follow. Soon Imad-ul-Mulk planned to pay off old scores. A plan for ousting Najib from Delhi was concerted between Imad and the Marathas, in violation of his obligation to Ahmed Shah Abdali. Accordingly, Najib found himself besieged in July. In September, Najib was compelled to evacuate Delhi and he ultimately retired to his estates whence he appealed to Ahmed Shah Abdali to come to his help.

Ahmed Shah responded and there was a battle at Panipat, in 1761, where the Marathas were badly defeated. For some time at least, it appeared that they would

not be able to disturb Delhi. On Abdali's final retirement from India in March 1761, Ahmed Shah recognized Shah Alam as emperor, Imad as Wazir, and Najib as Mir Bakhshi. But the hope that these three would work together proved to be in vain. Between Najib Khan and Imad-ul-Mulk lay the memory of repeated betrayals and the violation of Imad's household. Between Imad and Shah Alam lay the blood of murdered Alamgir. Najib used seduction to seize power for himself in Delhi. He persuaded the queen mother and heir-apparent, in the absence of Shah Alam, who was still in Behar, that Imad's return would mean the setting aside of Shah Alam's branch of the Mughal family, in favor of some other prince, like Shah Jahan III, whom he had set up for nine months after the murder of Alamgir. While Imad after receiving the robes of office from Najib's agent, was delaying at Mathura in order to assemble the Jat troops of his supporter Raja Suraj Mal of Bharatpur, Najib entered Delhi on 7 April, 1761 at the heir apparent's invitation. Najib was confirmed as *Mir Bakhshi* and appointed *Faujdar* of the Delhi district and *Mukhtiar* of the Imperial Government by Shah Alam.

Jat & Sikhs: The Sikhs were watching the drama enacted at Delhi, as also the aspirations of the Jat leader as well as of the Marathas. They were also defining their goals vis-à-vis Delhi politics. They were specially prodded by the factional warfare at the Mughal court. They had taken Sirhind on the 4th January, 1764. By the middle of February 1764, they poured into the upper Doab by crossing Jamuna at Buriya Ghat. This was done by Budha Dal because the Taruna Dal had come back to the Punjab immediately after the fall of Sirhind.

The Sikhs under Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, and other Sikh chiefs like Khushlal Singh, Baghel Singh, Banga Singh, Karan Singh, and Dal Singh at the head of about 4000 horse plundered Saharanpur, Shamli Kandhlah, Ambli, Miranpur, Deoband, Muzaffar Nagar, Janalpur, Kankhal, Landhaurah, Najibabad, Nagina, Moradabad, Chandausi, Anupshahar and GarhMukteshhar. Najib-ud-Daula rushed towards the Sikhs and by fast movement arrived near them. Awed by them, he thought it appropriate to buy off the Sikhs by paying a blackmail of eleven lakh rupees. The Sikhs returned and the Najib was relieved to focus his attention on the activities of Jawahar Singh.

Just about ten months after in November-December 1764, when Jawahar Singh mounted pressure on Delhi Durbar by invading it, the Sikhs starting playing their own game. They plundered Najib's estates in Shaharanpur, Meeruth, Bijnor, etal. Budhha Dal under Jassa Singh Ahluwalia crossed the Jamuna at Buriya Ghat and entered the Ganga Doab. They swept over the major portion of the rich territory and displayed great alacrity in searching for loot, even piercing to the remotest village situated at the foot of the hills. Najib was besieged in Delhi and Hafiz Rehmat Khan at the head of a detachment of 6000 offered the intruders only nominal resistance and then quietly retired. According to the author of *Gulistan-i-Rehmat*, the visitation of the Sikhs is ranked among the most terrible ones which ever befell this unfortunate country [1].

In January 1765, the Sikhs got another chance to raid Delhi. Jawahar Singh Jat, son of Suraj Mal, had besieged Najib-ud-Daula early in November, 1764, but the siege got prolonged. This thing panicked Jawahar Singh who decided to seek help from the Sikhs who were plundering the Gangetic Doab. He negotiated with them and made them agree to get a large sum of money in lieu of their help to him. The

Sikhs arrived at Bareari Ghat twenty kilometers from the city. The river on that day being fordable Jawahar Singh crossed it in boats to converse with the Sikhs to determine strategy to reduce Delhi to submission. More than a hundred Sikh Sardars came to receive him. The conference commenced with 'Ardas,' a Punjabi term literally meaning prayer, by the Sikhs. In it, the Sikhs said "Jawahar Singh, the son of Suraj Mal, has come within the shelter of the 'Khalsa Jiu' and became a Sikh of Nanak. He is demanding redress for his father's blood." Jawahar Singh did not like such utterances in the Ardas as these did not recognise him equal in status to the Sikhs. But he had to bear all this because of the dire need of Sikh help. It was settled that the Sikhs would give a fight and dig trenches in the direction from which they had come, Naner, the north of the city. Jawahar Singh would fight from the eastern side while the Sikh horsemen would render help on the west so as to cut off provisions from the city. Najib-ud-Daula's forces also arrayed themselves at strategic points to move and assault. Najib himself mounted an elephant and with a contingent each of horsemen and infantry stationed near Lahori Gate.

Opportunism & Valour: Both the sides fought doggedly and valorously. The Sikhs displayed their fighting skill. For twenty days, the battle went on till January, 1765. Najib-ud-Daula was defeated by the soldiers of Jawahar Singh and the Sikhs. The Sikhs' method of warfare described picturesquely by Nur-ud-din, an eye-witness [2]. He says, "Each day, the Sikh troopers tried to ride out and enter the old houses which lay desolate, near the garden of Yakub Ali Khan on the river bank, such as the mansions of Namkin and Hafiz-uddin Khan and the Babdalpura and other Mohallas and wished to come towards the city walls. Leaving his men at different places in the trenches near the river, Najib himself with a force of horse and foot and his battle-drums mounted on elephant etc. came out by the Lahori Gate, posted his men under the cover of some ruined house or lane while he himself sat down on a stone. The Rohillas engaged the Sikhs with their matchlocks. The musketry fight continued briskly till two gharis after night fall. Mian Niaz Gul, a risaldar of Najib, was wounded with a bullet. The Rohilla infantry piled their muskets well. Najib told his men to fire their rockets on the Sikhs wherever the Sikh horsemen were found standing in a knot. At some places, fighting took place and the Sikhs courage and doggedness were praiseworthy."

Another battle was fought between Najib and the Sikhs aided by the Jats on the 25th January, 1765 on the hill near the horse market (*Nakhas*) and the Sabzi Mandi. A large number of men were slain and wounded. The result, however, was indecisive. In the meantime, news reached the Sikhs that Ahmed Shah Abdali was advancing towards Delhi. The Sikhs packed up along with their booty and retired to the Punjab. They did not even ask leave of Jawahar Singh.

In October 1765, the Sikhs again decided to invade the country of Najib-ud-Daula. The Taruna Dal crossed the Jamuna River at Buriya Ghat and entered Saharanpur District while the Budha Dal consisting of 25,000 horse under the leadership of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, Tara Singh, Sham Singh and other Sardars attacked Najib's Jagirs in the country north of Delhi. They ravaged the villages in the environs of Delhi and Saharanpur. Thereafter, they left for Amritsar to celebrate Diwali.

Price of Peace: Soon after the Diwali celebrations, they came to Gangetic Doab and battled against Najib at Shamli, 20 kilometers east of Karnal. Najib's loss was

immense but it had its desired effect, i.e. to say the Sikhs were forced to cross Jamuna. This happened in December 1765. In January- February 1766, the Taruna Dal advanced to cross Delhi and joined Budha Dal in the neighborhood of Khark Hauda, 32 kilometers from Delhi. The Sikhs, instead of fighting against Najib who was keeping a close watch on their movements, marched onward plundering and pillaging the country of Jawahar Singh a little south of Delhi. The Raja bought peace by giving the Sikhs an amount of seven lakh. In doing so, the Raja had a motive. He wanted to hire a body of them to assist him against the Marathas who were hard pressing him. The Sikhs did help him and in the process accompanied him to attack Jaipur to divert the concentration of the Marathas on the frontier of the Jat kingdom. Realizing that the Sikhs' help to Jawahar Singh had made him formidable, Madho Singh and Raja of Jaipur, bribed them with the result that Jawahar Singh was forced to retire to his own country.

Shortly after, the Sikhs in conjunction with the forces of Jawahar Singh, defeated the Marathas near Dholpur (March 13-14, 1766). Jawahar Singh wanted to advance upon Malhar Rao Holkar, then a dying man and lying encamped beyond the Chambal but the Sikhs refused to proceed to grassless and waterless tract. Perforce, he had to abandon his profit. The Sikhs were escorted out of his kingdom by Jawahar Singh. They approached Delhi and began to loot Najib's jagir. Immediately after, they advanced to Delhi. Afzal Khan, an appointee of Najib to take care of Delhi, was struck with consternation and forbade the residents of Delhi to move towards Okhlaghat where the Sikhs had encamped. Two days later, the Sikhs marched from Okhlaghat and looted warehouses of rice and sugar in the Paharganj market and lay encamped at Masuri. Some of the Sikh horsemen advanced up to *Bain* of Sheikh Muhammad and plundered camels and bullocks. They were attacked by Afzal Khan's horsemen and forced to retreat [3]. The Sikhs then marched up the east bank of Jamuna and raided Kutana, Jhunjuna and Budhana. Najib who had arrived near Delhi by this time engaged them while they were planning to go back to their respective territories in Malwa and Trans-Sutlej regions along with the huge booty they had acquired from Malhar Rao plus a large sum which Jawahar Singh gave them. Najib was able to make them leave a huge portion of their booty by wasting them in battle.

In the engagement between the Sikhs and Najib, Amar Singh of Patiala had given considerable assistance to Najib-ud-Daula *against* the Sikhs. This caused a lot of perturbation among the Sikhs [4]. In May 1767, the Sikhs again entered the territory of Najib-ud-Daula under the very eyes of Ahmed Shah Abdali. Leaving their families and effects in the jungles of Rohtak, Bhatinda, and Hissar region they crossed the Jamuna at Buriya Ghat. They sacked the districts of Saharanpur, Ambeth and Nannuta. After this, they directed their attention to the Barah Sadat settlement, a cluster of twelve Sayyad villages around Mirpur, in Muzaffar Nagar district. Then they stormed Meeruth. Najib solicited help from Ahmed Shah Abdali who was still in the country. Jahan Khan, the commander-in-chief of Abdali at once came to his help. The Sikhs were overtaken and defeated. In December, 1767, they again raided the territory of Najib but had to retreat to their own territories after having been worsted in the battle.

Delhi Ransacked: Now Najib went to Aonla, where he celebrated the marriage of his son Kala Khan. Finding him absorbed in the ritual festivities, the Sikhs again

spread in the paraganas of Karnal and Panipat and ravaged the Imperial domains. Najib rushed to punish them. Various battles were fought. Ultimately, Najib was defeated. Now, the Sikhs marched to Delhi and menaced the Imperial Capital. Masnavi Lehan, the Emperor's agent, was too weak to take a stand. The city was looted thoroughly [5]. According to a Marathi dispatch, Najib suffered another defeat in December 1768. This was the last battle which he fought with the Sikhs. He died in 1770.

On January 4, 1770, the Sikhs made bold of entering the estate of Najib-ud-Daula. Having sacked places near Panipat, they attacked Delhi. Najib was lying ill at Delhi. His son, Zabita Khan came to oppose them. The Sikhs demanded a large sum as the price of their friendship. Zabita Khan declined to entertain any such proposal. An engagement took place between the two but it decided nothing [6]. The Sikhs advanced from Panipat plundering villages on their way to Delhi where they reached on 10 January 1770. Zabita Khan followed them but no action was fought for he was not sure of logistical support. On the 14th January, the Sikhs entered the Jat territory. Zabita Khan felt relief and gave up their pursuit.

Immediately after this, the Sikhs centered the Doab and encamped near Aligarh. The Sikhs then reached Chunar where Samru arrived to bring about peace between the Jats and the Sikhs, and to use these forces in the cause of Mir Qasim against the British government. The Sikhs could not be prevailed upon and they returned to their former encampment near Aligarh.

In January 1770, the Sikhs received an invitation from Jats of Bharatpur to which they readily responded, expecting a rich reward. The occasion came in the wake of Jawahar Singh's death in June 1768. Ratan Singh who succeeded to Jawahar Singh was murdered by his Brahmin priest Gosain Rupanand on the 8th April, 1769. Dan Singh the commander-in-chief of the Jat force became regent for Ranjit Singh who wanted to overthrow the Regent who was not of royal blood but a Jat of ordinary descent. Soon, both the brothers fell out over the distribution of power. Nawal Singh (brother of Ranjit Singh) cleverly won over the influential courtier and Ranjit Singh had to seek shelter in the fort of Kumbher. Ranjit Singh in expiration, invited the Sikh of the cross-Sutlej territory to his assistance. The Sikhs readily agreed. Nawal Singh, therefore, led a Jat force to punish them. The Sikhs heedless of the pursuing forces started plundering Jat villages. The Jat army in pursuit of the Sikhs was divided into three parts: the advance guard under the charge of Rané Medec and Gopal Rao Maratha, main body under Nawal Singh and the rear guard. A fierce engagement took place. The Jats suffered a heavy loss. According to the author of *The Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, in this fight almost all Jat leaders were wounded, with the exception of the French chief with one or two of his European companions. The total loss of the Jats amounted to four or five hundred killed and wounded with more than the double the enemy left in the field. The Sikhs also suffered loss but far less than the Jats.

The Sikhs while retreating ravaged many villages in the Jat domain. They also looted the suburbs of Delhi. The Sikh ravages have been amply described by F.S. Wendel [7], a French missionary encamped at Agra, in his letter dated March 3, 1770. The Sikhs upto now had become the focus of the attention of almost all powers: the British, the Jats, the Marathas, and the Mughals. The Governor of Bengal wrote on the 24th February, 1770 to Dundi Khan, a cousin of Hafiz Rahmat

Khan and the father-in-law of Najib-ud-Daula: "It is necessary for the well-being of Hindustan that the Sikhs should not be allowed to cross the frontier of Sirhind nor the Marathas the river Narbada. To admit these people into the heart of Hindustan would be to cherish a snake in one's bosom. It is better to awake to the danger before it is too late."

January 18, 1774

Plundering the Doab on the way, the Sikhs appeared early in 1774 in the royal domain near Delhi. The Mughal court could not muster courage to oppose them. The Sikhs advanced to the suburbs of the capital. On the 18th January, 1774, the Sikhs devastated Shahdara till midnight and departed with fifty boys as hostages when there still remained an hour and a half of night [9]. It is said that the houses of the Mughal nobility were devastated while they themselves were stuffed of their last penny [10]. The Emperor decided to buy them off. He invited the Sikhs to enter his service with a body of 10,000 horses and offered to allot to them the district of Saharanpur for their support. Those overtures of the Emperor were not seriously taken by the Sikhs.

In October 1774, the Sikhs again invaded Delhi. Abdul Ahad Khan who was appointed as deputy wazir, next to Najib Khan, the grand Wazir entered with negotiations with the Sikh chiefs with a view to secure immunity for the royal domain from their depredations. He wrote to Ray Singh Bahadur, Bhag Singh Bahadur and Sundar Singh Bahadur to enter the Imperial service. Each Sardar was to have 1000 horses and 500 foot with him. Each horseman was to have a salary of Rs. 30 per month and a foot soldier of Rs. 50. The negotiations could not materialize and the Sikhs started ravaging the land in the environs of Shah Jahanabad. Najib-ud-Daula died on 31st October 1770 and was succeeded by his son, Zabita Khan. Shah Alam the second, who was at Allahabad, appointed Mir Bakhshi and wanted him to exhort him to Delhi. Zabita Khan declared much to the displeasure of the Emperor who was then escorted to Delhi by Mahadji Sindhia. Zabita Khan did not show even the courtesy of attending the coronation ceremony of the Emperor. The infuriated Emperor dispatched a force under Najaf Khan, his first minister, to punish him. Zabita Khan asked for peace which was readily granted. The Emperor also restored his estate in Saharanpur, Meeruth and Najibabad, understandably to assuage Zabita Khan. Just at this time, Ahad Khan, a Kashmiri confidant of the Emperor and second Mir Bakhshi of the Empire who detested the mounting influence of Najib Khan made overtures to Zabita Khan to align with him against Najib Khan. Zabita Khan refused to play into his hands with the result that Ahad Khan turned hostile to him. Now Zabita Khan thought it politically sagacious to enter into alliance with the Sikhs who had become a power in the north India.



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