

Turbulent Times: Sikhs in early 18th Century

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Guru Nanak's teachings gave the Sikhs a sense of community. This was to increase under the nine Guru's who followed. It was, however, the tenth Guru Gobind Singh who revolutionized Sikh society by creating the Khalsa and transforming 'a sect of pacifists into a militant brotherhood of crusaders' (Khushwant Singh). He died in 1708 but he had fired the imagination of the people in their fight against injustice, given them a deep longing for freedom, 'trained the sparrow to fight the hawk' and convinced them that *Raj karega Khalsa* (The Khalsa shall rule).

The mantle fell on Banda Bahadur who came into Punjab like a whirlwind. Despite his capture and early death in 1715, he had given the Sikhs a taste of freedom and sovereignty which they would never forget. Although the acute dissension between Banda and Mata Sundari, Guru Gobind Singh's widow weakened him, it was evident that the Mughal Emperor was still a power to reckon with and Banda's demise was only a matter of time. It was left to those that followed Banda in the turbulent times of the 18th century that finally enabled Punjab to gain its freedom from Mughal and Afghan rule and achieve sovereignty for the Sikhs. For this they had to cooperate at all levels, establish a unified military command, collect military and other resources and create an atmosphere where every Sikh was motivated to fight against all odds. Martyrdoms, a vital part of the Sikh psyche, helped. But it was the Sikh Sardars, some of whom rose to royal status, that were chiefly responsible for the success that followed. "A hard core of individuals refused to submit to the Mughals" (J.S. Grewal *The Sikhs of the Punjab* C.U.P. 1997) External factors, specifically the invasions of Nadir Shah in 1739 and the great Afghan king, Ahmad Shah Abdali which commenced in 1748 were to be all important for this purpose.

The cooperation of the Sikh Sardars was at its height during these times. Once the common danger of Abdali had been finally removed, personal ambitions reflected in a desire for more territory, many times at the expense of their co-religionists, came to the fore. Any dispute between two Chiefs or within a *Misl* (Division) was seen as an opportunity for interference and self aggrandizement. Competition and conflict became the order of the day. Some even acted against the interests of the Panth. The Khalsa could still take united action as late as 1783 when Jassa Singh sat on the throne of Delhi but real unity really did not exist and this was evident even on this campaign. When the Emperor, in 1783, impressed by the Sikhs, asked Baghel Singh to show him how they fought, he gave a display in the fields nearest the Red Fort, which showed them first fighting together and looting and then fighting over the loot! Dissension had weakened the Sikhs to such an extent that Shah Zaman, Ahmad Shah's grandson was able to conquer Lahore in 1798 with ease and even had the Sikh chiefs attending on him!

The Sikhs after the death of Banda were dispersed and disheartened. A period of intense misery followed till the early 1730's. They barely managed to survive. There was no question of military action, joint or otherwise. The tone was set by Emperor Farrukh Siyar's edicts of 1718 giving rewards for any Sikhs captured, dead or alive. The Sikhs when captured, were taken to the main markets and summarily beheaded. Anyone who helped the Sikhs was imprisoned and their property confiscated. In this period, about 10,000 Sikhs were systematically wiped out. Leaderless, they escaped to the Lakhi jungles and the Malwa desert tracts. But despite near starvation and hopelessness the few that remained

somehow managed to hold on. Intense repression causing much hatred ensured a semblance of support for what was to become a widespread movement of the lower peasantry. Effective leadership began to emerge which was to raise morale and help regroup. Circumstances were to prove helpful. As he no longer received any support from Delhi, Abdus Samad Khan, the Governor of Punjab was to relax his measures against the Sikhs. The Sikhs meanwhile attacked the villages near their places of refuge. Cattle lifting and the stealing of horses became commonplace. They became successful in looting - 500,000 rupees were taken in three separate raids on the Mughal armies in Khundian (Lahore district), Chavinda (Amritsar district) and Kahney Kachley (Gurdaspur district). Subsequently they looted the horse caravan of Murtaza Khan. Bhag Singh Hollowalia and Budh Singh Suckerchakia joined up to loot a 700 strong caravan going up to the Mughal court in Delhi. The success of this undertaking which was to enrich them with gold and silver was to form the basis of a friendship between the two families which lasted till the end of the century. Abdus Samad Khan made an attempt to win them over by offering them posts in the Govt. and even enlisted them in the army. This did not have the desired effect. The office bearers of the Government-the *Chakrail Singhs*, were able to give timely information to their militant counterparts-the *Raath Singhs* who were able to move about more freely and loot more efficiently. Things came to a head when other tribes too joined in-the *Bhattis*, *Dogars*, *Sials*, *Baloches* etc. so there was complete confusion in the Punjab much to the benefit of the Sikhs.

At this point, the Emperor decided to send someone more ruthless to subdue the Sikhs, who were blamed for everything as they were the more visible of the trouble makers. Zakaria Khan replaced his father, Abdus Samad as Governor of Lahore, the latter retaining the Governorship of Multan. Zakaria Khan took firm and effective steps. He organized bands of cavalry – *Gasti fauj* with the sole purpose of killing Sikhs. Thousands were slaughtered in battle or otherwise. Shahid Jung in Lahore gets its name from the large number of Sikhs brought in chains and summarily executed. The fort built at Dallewal too was brought down. The Sikhs dispersed once again to the remotest areas of Punjab and beyond to the desert of Rajasthan. Kapur Singh, the most prominent leader of the Sikhs was the only one who could organize a large enough following and give any effective help. He did so for Ala Singh (to become Raja of Patiala).

Rae Kalha of Raekot and Jagraon had organized a confederacy of Muslim chiefs against Ala Singh, the 'Hindu upstart'. Although Ala Singh was supported by Chaudhry Vir Bhan, they were no match for the powerful confederacy of Malerkotla, Halwan and Jalandhar Doab. Kapur Singh came to his rescue and in the battle of Thikriwala (1730), the confederacy was defeated and the Governor of the Jalandhar Doab, Azad Ali Khan was killed. The Sikhs came into large quantities of guns, horses and other war materials.

Zakaria Khan realized the tenacity of the Sikhs and decided to become conciliatory. He made a grand offer of appeasement – removing all restrictions on the movement of the Sikhs, a jagir of 100000 rupees a year and a title of Nawab for their leader, which fell on Kapur Singh. The agreement lasted two short years. The Khalsa were then on the defensive in the years mostly because of the firm measures taken by Zakaria Khan. The Sikh waited for an opportunity to increase their power. The first such opportunity came with the invasion of Nadir Shah in 1739. Nadir Shah's invasion, which was like a thunderbolt, created the first opportunity to cooperate and further their objectives. Nadir Shah defeated Zakaria Khan and insisted on taking his army with him to Delhi enabling the Sikhs to loot with impunity. On his way back Nadir Shah, preferring to go via the hills to avoid the April heat was attacked and plundered by Kapur Singh, Bhuma Singh, the founder of what was to be the

Bhangi clan, Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and others.

The Mughal Empire was weakening-the Marathas had risen as a force, some of the Governors had revolted and Mughal finances were in disarray, this being exacerbated by the Ijara system of revenue farming. Repression continued but only till Zakaria Khan's death in 1745. His brother, Abdullah who officiated for a while undid most of Zakaria Khan's good work, being exceedingly selfish and oppressive to both Hindus and Sikhs. A civil war between the sons of Zakaria Khan – Shahnawaz and Yahiya, and the revolt of the Raja of Jammu added to the confusion and uncertainty. The Sikhs were able to make their presence felt more openly. They raided villages, killed those who had helped the Government and even made a daring attack on Lahore in January 1746. It was sometime after this raid that Jaspat Rai, Diwan Lakhpat Rai's brother was killed in an encounter with Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. Lakhpat Rai was determined to avenge his brother's death.

The **Chhota Ghallughara** is the description given by the Sikhs to the defeat and slaughter at the hands of the Mughals under Lakhpat Rai. About 7000 Sikhs died. This was despite heroic fighting and brilliant generalship. Lakhpat Rai was to do more. He closed all Gurdwaras and demolished some of them. The Granth Sahibs were burnt or thrown into wells. The reading of the *Gurbani* was forbidden and no one was allowed to take Nanak's name or indeed of any Guru. He had decided to end the religion. There was to be another defeat in the same year – Yahiya was victorious at Gajjarwal. Their luck was to change-Shahnawaz Khan defeated Yahiya to become Governor dismissed Lakhpat Rai, the chief architect of measures against the Sikhs and operations against them came to an abrupt end. The Sikhs built the Ram Rauni fort at Amritsar in 1747. The Mughals attacked and besieged it but luck was on their side-the siege was called off because of Ahmad Shah's impending invasion in 1748.

1748 was a watershed. There was still a long way to go but many factors existed which contributed to unity and cooperation among the Sikhs. As important for the unity of the Khalsa

was the Sikh (Singh) insistence on the end of personal Guruship after Guru Gobind Singh, upholding the doctrine not only against the old dissenters but also against the new contenders like Gulab Rai, a grandson of Guru Hargobind and the Gangu Shah, Kharak Singh, the successor of an eminent follower of Guru Amar Das. (J.S. Grewal – *The Sikhs of the Punjab*)

Amritsar was to become a rallying centre for the Sikhs and the most important place of Sikh pilgrimage (J.S. Grewal – *The Sikhs of the Punjab*) and indeed was given to the Sikhs in *Jagir* by Zakaria Khan in 1733. **The Sikhs made it a point of honour to defend Amritsar whenever they could. It was their firm belief that by dying there, they would go to heaven. It was finally captured by the Sikhs in a historic victory under Jassa Singh Ahluwalia in 1748 but was to come permanently under their control much later.** Most important many courageous and daring individuals emerged as leaders who refused to accept Mughal authority. Gradually they accumulated gold, silver, horses and war stores which gave them greater power to fight the Mughals. Among these were Kapur Singh, Bhai Mani Singh, Bhag Singh Hollowalia, Budh Singh Suckerchakia and others. Subsequently other were to emerge among whom the most important being Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. They were to harness the peasantry particularly the militant Jats, and organize and motivate them as never before.

Victory changes perception and the Sikhs began to get a taste of it. This would make them bolder and go all out for full sovereignty. After Lakhpat Rai was reinstated in 1747 he was to go after them and ordered Raja Gurdit Mal, Faujdar of the Hill Territories to attack them. At

the battle near the villages of Sadra and Badra, the Sikhs defeated the Raja and a large booty of war stores fell into their hands. This victory had come with a lesser force of 2500 facing 5000. After a decision taken at the Baisakhi festival at Amritsar, the Sikhs attacked and liberated Amritsar under Jassa Singh Ahluwalia's command. The victory was historic. Kapur Singh, Tara Singh Warian, Chuhar Singh Bakhian and others were present and were able to capture the fortress despite a valiant fight by the Rajput defender, Salabat Khan, who was killed by Jassa Singh in a hand to hand encounter. The victories had begun to ensure (together with other factors) that there was first a reduction in the numbers that worked for any Mughal or Afghan Master. As late as 1752 Sucha Singh had died fighting for Mir Mannu against Ahmad Shah Abdali. Bhagwan Singh had died fighting for Zakaria Khan against Nadir Shah in 1739. His sons had shown exemplary courage in saving the life of Zakaria Khan and had been given a village each with Jassa Singh Thoka (later Ramgarhia), the eldest, being given rank of *Risaldar*, the others being made *Tumandars*. There was to be a change of heart with Jassa Singh Ramgarhia during the siege of Ram Rauni, the fort at Amritsar in early 1748. He decided his lot was with his co-religionists and he left the service of Abdus Samad Khan, the Governor of the Jalandhar Doab.

It was after the liberation of Amritsar that the Sikhs from all over arrived there for Baisakhi on the 29th March, 1748 and formally organized themselves. In the emotionally charged atmosphere after the conquest of Amritsar, their holy town, which had not been seen for many years, Jassa Singh was elected Commander-in-Chief of the Dal Khalsa. Kapur Singh had first divided the Khalsa into Buddha and Taruna Dal in 1734; In 1746 there were 25 Jathas (bands) of a 100 each which had increased to 65 Bands before the meeting at Amritsar. It was an achievement par excellence that the Dal Khalsa was now divided into 11 divisions or Misls which would be independent entities but act in unison whenever there was a common danger or in pursuit of mutually beneficial objectives. These were the Ahluwalia Misl with Jassa Singh as its head; the Bhangi Misl with Hari Singh as its head; the Dallewalia Misl under Gulab Singh; The Faizllpuria Misl under Nawab Kapur Singh; the Kanhaiya Mil under Jai Singh; the Karorasinghia Misl under Karora Singh; the Nakai Misl under Hira Singh; the Nishanwala Misl under Dasaunda Singh; The Ramgarhia Misl under Nand Singh Sanghaniya; the Shahid Misl under Deep Singh; the Suckerchakia Misl under Nodh Singh. There was another division-the Phulkians under Amar Singh of Patiala who whilst his sympathies lay with the Sikh community, his actions went against it when they were trying to placate the Mughals and Afghans! The Misls were further divided into the Taruna Dal and the Budh Dal. It was agreed that they would be independent entities but act in unison whenever there was a common danger or the pursuit of mutually beneficial objectives. Further they agreed to meet at Amritsar twice a year at Baisakhi and Diwali where strategy and other matters relevant to the community were discussed.

Resolutions-**Gurmatas** passed there during these meetings were to be binding on all even if they were not present. It was also decided to make a permanent fort around the Tank at Amritsar. The Akalis, defenders of the faith, were to maintain discipline among the rank and file in religious matters. They were later to come under the supreme control of the Commander in chief so that Jassa Singh Ahluwalia would become both the head of the church and State. **With such unity of command, the Sikhs would now have a better chance to pursue the objectives of freedom and sovereignty!**

