

The Matchless Heroism of Banda Bahadur

DR. SANGAT SINGH*

** Eminent Historian & author of "The Sikhs in History". Address: Gr. Kailash II, New Delhi. 110048. Excerpts from his book, published with permission.*

"The early history of Banda Bahadur [1670-1716] is known only by tradition. Probably born in Poonch, on the northern fringe of Punjab, he was called Lachman Dev, and became a Vaishnava ascetic under the name of Madhav Das – until he came face to face with Guru Gobind Singh ji in the Deccan, circa 1708 when he instantly converted to the Sikh faith, and was renamed Banda (slave)."

Historical Dictionary of Sikhism, WH McLeod. (The Scarecrow Press, USA)

THE SIKHS EMERGED ON THE POLITICAL scene of the Punjab and northern India under the leadership of Banda Singh Bahadur who was especially commissioned by Guru Gobind Singh Ji to initiate the emancipatory process of political change and reform.

Banda Singh took almost a year to surface near Delhi.¹ His *hukmnamahs* to **Sikh sangat to join him fully armed** evoked instant response. The people of Malwa readily gathered under his banner, while those from Majha and Doaba moved in an organized manner to arrive at Kiratpur, after fighting their way across the Malerkotla Pathans who blocked their way on the Sutlej. In due course, according to Ghulam Mohyuddin (*Fathuhat Namah-i-Samadi*, 1722-23) "people as far as Iran, Turan, Kandhar, Multan and neighboring climes and countries" started pouring into the Punjab in large numbers in disguise or even openly by the beat of the drum.

Reform:

Banda Singh's proclamation calling upon all those who had suffered at the hands of oppressive Zamindars, or were tormented by anti-social elements, bullies, and despots, to join him to get justice, opened up a Pandora's box. It evoked an overwhelming response from people of all faiths, including Hindus and Muslims – to create vistas for a people's revolution. Banda Singh moved in a calculated manner to create general disorder and contempt for the imperial authority.

He ransacked the state treasury and the houses of the rich at Sonapat, and worsted the small detachment carrying government treasury at Kaithal, of both cash and horses. In his first major action, he stormed Samana² on November 26, 1709, leaving 10,000 dead, and followed up by routing Faujadars of Kapuri and Mustafabad.

That brought him to Sadhaura whose chief, Usman Khan, had earned the ire of Guru Gobind Singh Ji because of his torturing of Pir Badruddin, alias, Buddha Shah, and his disciples, to death for their role in the Guru's escape from Machhiwara to Malwa. The Hindus of the town whose house used to be desecrated with beef by Usman Khan and his men, rose in revolt and went out of control. A general massacre followed, including of those who had taken shelter in Pir Buddha Shah's house, now renamed *Quatalgarhi*, the slaughter-fortress. In remorse Baba Banda Singh took a firm decision not to permit in future any attack on places of religious worship, or let the struggle be reduced to a sectarian strife.

Banda Singh skirted Sirhind, and those awaiting at Kiratpur joined him. He was now ready for an attack on Subedar Wazir Khan of Sirhind against whom the Sikhs had a special

animus. Wazir Khan in self defence made Mullahs to raise cries of *Jehad* – religious war – against the Sikhs. He also used Diwan Sucha Nand's nephew to infiltrate with a 1,000 strong force into the opposing camp to kill Banda, if possible, or to desert his forces after having joined him, so as to cause general demoralization. Wazir Khan moved out 10 miles to Chapar Chiri to face Banda's forces which were ill-equipped but led by veterans of the wars of Guru Gobind Singh. In the fierce battle on May 12, 1710, despite large scale desertions from Banda's forces, especially of those who had come purely with motivations of plunder, Wazir Khan was killed and his forces routed. They were pursued upto Sirhind which submitted two days later.

'Reckless Bravery:'

On the fall of Sirhind, Banda Singh ministered to Hindus and Muslims alike. The town was ransacked for three days when he, to the chagrin of his troops, stopped the pillage. The Mausoleum of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, Mujaddad Alif Sani, (doyen of Islamic fundamentalism) and tormentor of the Sikhs, remained untouched. Now, the territory from Karnal to Ludhiana lay at his feet. The contemporary Muslim historians, though full of choicest invectives against the Sikhs as "wretched and worthless dogs", "hellish infidels", "fanatical ruffians", and Banda Singh himself as a "veritable monster", the vocabulary which we find throughout the Muslim writing on the Sikhs in the 18th century,³ were high praise for their reckless bravery.

Wise Ruler:

Banda Singh now assumed the title of Bahadur and set to organize the administration. Baj Singh was appointed Governor of Sirhind with Ali Singh (formerly in service of Subedar of Sirhind) as his deputy. The appointment of Fateh Singh (son of Baj Singh) as head of administration of Samana was confirmed while Ram Singh (younger brother of Baj Singh) and Binod Singh got the joint charge of Thanesar and the surrounding territory. A host of other appointments followed. From now onwards, Khalsa began to recite the couplet, *raj karega Khalsa* (Khalsa shall rule), in their congregations as part of their litany.⁴

Banda Singh chose Mukhlispur, at the foot of Himalayas, as his headquarters. He introduced a new calendar dating from his capture of Sirhind and **struck coins as a mark or Sikh sovereignty.**⁵ **He appointed Sikhs from low classes "a low scavenger or leather dresser, the lowest of the low in Indian estimation," as Irvine puts it, as thanedars and tehsildars in his *parganas*.**⁶ **He abolished Zamindari – the institution of absentee landlordism and made tillers of the soil the proprietors. That was applicable to tillers of all classes whether Sikh, Hindu or Muslim.**

Ghulam Mohyuddin author of *Futihat Nama-i-Samadhi* (1722-23) who fought against Banda's forces and calls them "devils incarnate" and "a calamity on earth" testifies that Banda ruthlessly annihilated **social inequalities born out of caste prejudices**, enforces rigid abstinence of the Sikhs from adultery, and otherwise adopted codes of conduct for his forces "to present themselves as embodiment of moral values."

Banda Singh now made forays into the Gangetic valley. The uprising of the Gujjars who declared themselves *Nanak-Prasth*, followers of Nanak, strengthened his forces. He overran Saharanpur, Behar, Ambheta, and Nanauta by July 1710 when he laid siege to Jalalabad. It had to be lifted because of pressing demands of the Sikhs from Doaba.

Liberation:

The Sikh uprising in Jalandar Doab came to successful fruition on October 3, 1710, when they drove out the forces of Faujdar Shams Khan from Rahon. Earlier, the Sikhs of Majha extended their sway upto the outskirts of Lahore. Significantly, at the battle of Kotla began near Batala, they permitted the Afghans of Sauri village, who did not want to fight, to retire unmolested. In a short time, the Sikhs were masters of the area from the Ravi to the Jumna.

Bahadur Shah was apprised of the news of Banda Singh's exploits on May 30, 1710, when he was Ajmer. Taking into view the poignancy of the situation, he made up with the Rajputs and called for volunteers for '*Jehad* against the Sikhs'. He ordered mobilisation of available force as far as Oudh, rallied Bundhela Rajputs against the Sikhs, while he proceeded to the Punjab.

After the rainy season, the Mughal military machine started rolling the Sikhs back from various positions right from Sonapat (October 22, 1710), through different towns due down to the siege of Lohgarh fort (early December). Hundreds of Sikhs were killed at various places and their heads sent to the Emperor. Banda Singh, however, escaped on the night of December 10, 1710, towards Shivalik hills to the chagrin of Bahadur Shah who now issued orders from his camp near Lohgarh to Faujdars in the neighbourhood of Delhi "to kill the worshippers of Nanak (the Sikhs) wherever they are found".

Liberation:

Banda Singh within a fortnight started sending orders to the Sikhs to liberate the Punjab and join him at Kiratpur. Presently, he sought to secure his hinterland. His first victim was Raja Ajmer Chand of Kahlur (Bilaspur), the mastermind behind bringing about a confrontation between the Mughal administration and the Khalsa in the post-1699 period. Other hill chiefs submitted. The ruler of Chamba offered him his daughter in marriage. Later, he married a second time.

It is to the credit of Banda Singh Bahadur that despite the stresses, he kept to the non-sectarian creed of the Khalsa. In spite of Bahadur Shah's provocative orders of outright extirpation of the Sikhs, Banda Singh according to the royal newswriter, while at Kalanaur in April 1711, "has promised and proclaimed: ***We do not oppress the Muslims or oppose Islam, but only tyranny and usurpation of power.*** Accordingly, for any Muslim who approaches him, he fixes a daily allowance and wages, and looks after him. He has permitted them to recite *Khutba* and *namaz*. As such, five hundred Muslims have gathered around him. Having entered into his friendship, they are free to shout their call – *bang* – and say their prayers – *namaz* – in the army of the wretched (Sikhs)".

Bahadur Shah's death in February 1712, at Lahore, gave Banda Singh some respite. **But with the coming into power of Farrukhsiyar in another year, the campaign against the Sikhs was pursued with vigour and venom.** Banda Singh, thereafter, had no positive achievement till his surrender at Gurdas Nanal in end-1715. He even failed to accept Binod Singh's sound advice to cut through the besieging forces and pursue guerrilla instead of conventional warfare.

Banda Singh Bahadur's successes were shortlived because of his lack of appreciation of the forces arraigned against him. If he were face to face with the oppressive forces in the Punjab only, he was and would have been a success. But the Mughal resources were vast – the whole of the empire. Banda Singh should have, **firstly**, confined merely to destruction of the oppressive forces and not tried to organize an alternative administration which made him overextend his meager resources. In other words, he should have continued to operate

as a guerilla leader rather than as a conventional military leader which led to his defeat. **Secondly**, he violated Guru Gobind Singh's instructions regarding corporate leadership of the Khalsa, provided by the council of *panj piaras*, five beloved ones, named by him to aid and advise him. By appointing Baj Singh as Governor of Sirhind and Binod Singh and others to a miscellany of positions, he struck at the root of corporate leadership, and emerged as the sole and absolute leader.

Banda Singh, however, died a heroic death. It was remarkable that not a single of over 700 Sikhs, a majority of whom had been arbitrarily rounded up from the villages along the route when Banda Singh's caravan was being taken from Lahore to Delhi, reneged his faith. They smilingly courted martyrdom, the bulk of them in March 1716 and Banda Singh and his top aides in a gruesome manner on June 9, 1716.

Banda Singh's unconventional heroism, laced with humanism, touched the imagination of the populace and signified that oppressors were liable to be called upon to account for their sins of omission and commission. These singularly helped to unleash dynamic forces in the body-politic, and despite the setbacks, instilled irrepressible confidence in the community.



References

1. The interval provided the Khalsa the necessary breather. It was also possibly utilized to spread the word about the mission entrusted to Banda Singh by Guru Gobind Singh.
2. Samana, a prosperoud town, built like a fortress, fell after three days, leaving 10,000 dead. Jalal-uddin, Shashal Beg, and Bashal Beg, the executioners of Guru Teg Bahadur, and the two younger sons of Guru Gobind Singh, respectively were punished.
3. This vocabulary was later picked by Hindu historians, especially Sir Jadu Nath Sarkar, the doyen of this period. Some Sikh chroniclers, thoughtlessly, picked up stories about Banda's bloodcurdling exploits.
4. Attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, the couplet forms part of Bhai Nand Lal's Tankhah Nama (Code of Conduct) for a member of the Khalsa. The full couplet reads "Khalsa shall rule, and no one will challenge their authority. Humiliated in defeat, all will join their ranks and he alone will be saved who seeks their refuge." Cf. Ganda Singh, "How the Sikh Raj came about", *Punjab Past and Present* (hereinafter PP&P) Vol. XV, October 1981, p. 433.
5. The Persian inscription on Banda Singh Bahadur's coins was as follows:

Obverse

Sikka zad har do alam tegh-i-Nanak wahib ast

fateh Gobind Singh Shah-i-shahan fazl-i-sacha sahib ast

Coinstruck for the two worlds with the sword of Nanak, and victory granted by the grace of Gobind Singh, King of Kings and the true Emperor.

Reverse

Zarb baa man-ud-dahar masavarat sahar

Zinat-ut-Takhat-i-Mubarak Bakht