

Thoughts on the Anniversary of “Wada Ghallughara”- 1761

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The sombre monotone of one of the wisest men of our times – the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, rang deep and clear through the cold January air as I paid a visit to Punjab earlier this year on the eve of the anniversary of Wada Ghalughara (the Great Holocaust – 1761). The occasion - Holocaust memorial anniversary at one of Hitler’s infamous concentration camps, probably Auschwitz. His words had depth, appeared heartfelt, as he urged humanity never to allow such atrocities to occur again and drew attention to the ethnic cleansing and gross abuse of human rights in the Dafur region of Sudan. In early February 2005, on the sixtieth anniversary of the “Fire bombing” of Dresden by the Allies (1945), in which 45000 civilians, mostly women and children, perished, the survivors agitated to have that tragic and barbaric attack on a defenseless city declared a holocaust.

So, shortly afterwards when my Delhi based friend rang me to ask if I would like to accompany him to Punjab to pay homage to the 25000 or so Sikhs, mostly women and children, who were subjected to *Wada Ghallughara* (large scale massacre or Holocaust) at the hands of Ahmad Shah Abdali and his Afghan horde, I instantly assented, slashed the ‘saddle packs’ on my faithful ‘Hero Honda Ambition’ motorcycle and in just over half a day, was in Delhi (I live in Kota, Rajasthan). As I rode towards Delhi, I marvelled at my own ignorance. I had a general idea about the holocausts committed from Belsen to Bangladesh, from Cambodia to Armenia, from Dresden to Dafur, but I knew nothing about the tumultuous and terrible events of 18th Century Punjab.

Our first call was a pre-lunch press conference held on Monday, 7th February 2005 at the Park Hotel in Ludhiana, courtesy Tikka Raja Shatruijit Singh of Kapurthala. I listened raptly as Tikka Saab who, wearing a *pugree* in the style of his legendary ancestor, Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, took us back into history, especially that of 18th Century Punjab which he felt, had been neglected, but came back to the present times, bemoaning the monumental neglect of Punjab’s heritage and historical marvels, such as the Versailles inspired palace and the Moorish style mosque built in Kapurthala by his grandfather, Maharaja Jagjit Singh, the eclectic ‘Shah Jehan’ of Kapurthala. He sadly concluded this was responsible for zero foreign tourism. I can partly vouch for that. In the two days we spent driving around in the Punjab, I did not see a single foreign tourist (who are ubiquitous in Rajasthan in winter), but when I saw some foreigners in the hotel, I was told matter of fact that they were business travellers, not Tourists! After that enlightening press conference, we proceeded to Pind Chandpurana, where we met “the saint” immersed in charitable work, especially the care of the elderly destitute. That was impressive, but what shocked me to the core were somewhat larger than life concrete tableaux depicting the terrible and unspeakable atrocities committed against the Sikhs by the Mughals and Afghans during the period from around 1650 to 1765.

The next day - Tuesday, 8th February, was the main day. We drove off after breakfast, in Tikka Saab’s convoy to two obscure (for me) Gurdwaras in the countryside around Malerkotla - at Kup and Rahira. We were given a rousing reception, the sound of horses mingled with chants and refrains “*Sat Sri Akal*” “*Jo bole so Nihal*” “*Wahe Guru Ji Ka Khalsa, Wahe Guru ji ki Fateh.. ...*”. The *Nihangs* (holy warriors), dressed in blue and carrying period weaponry, were a visual delight. Then came the long winded but enthusiastic speeches in Punjabi. I could pick up the *lietmotif* words and phrases like’

ghallughara (holocaust), '*zakhm*' (wound), '*shaheed*' (martyr), '*kurbani*' (sacrifice). For the benefit of non-Punjabis (like me) and the Press, Tikka Saab sprinkled his speech with English like "holocaust", "memorial" etc. During the speeches my friend busied himself collecting anecdotal data from several enthusiastic villagers, who gave graphic details of the "Wada Ghallughara" such as identifying the spot where the legendary Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, the leader of Sikhs, had changed his fatigued mount before rejoining the rear guard battle against the Afghans, notwithstanding several wounds. Such unrelenting heroics, displayed by Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and his men had saved many, many non-combatants, especially women and children, from falling prey to the slaughter.

At least three people, unconnected with each others narratives, told us with words to the effect that their hair stand on edge as they recalled the sacrifice and heroism of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and his men and the atrocities committed against the non-combatants. They recounted that the killing fields were reddened with blood for months after the '*Ghallughara*', which was a deliberate attempt by Ahmed Shah Abdali to exterminate the Sikhs, who under Jassa Singh's leadership, were making him pay a heavy price for the cruel and periodic depredation carried out in Punjab. The next day we drove back to Delhi. Beneath the Punjab greenery, I felt I could see another colour - Red blood. A retired Sikh General in Delhi felt that the Sikhs had been the second most persecuted people on the earth, the Jews deserving the top slot.

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