

# **Wada Ghallughara – the Great Holocaust:**

## **5<sup>th</sup> February, 1761**

*Sumant Dhamija\**

\* 6/32-A, Shanti Niketan, New Delhi 110 021.

The *Wada Ghallughara* of 1762 recalls to mind the dreadful massacre of the Sikhs by the Afghan invader Ahmad Shah Durrani that left some 25000 men, women and children dead. It is differentiated from the Chota Ghallughara (or small holocaust) in 1746 when 7,000 soldiers were killed by the Mughal army in occupation of Punjab. It came like a thunderbolt for the emerging Sikh nation. As evidence of the Sikh character, they refused to give up. They fought on with a dogged determination and defeated Ahmad Shah and his Indian allies in a short span of time.

The massacre derives its importance not only for the remembrance of the martyrs but the steely resolve that resulted, displayed subsequently by Punjabis in the face of insurmountable odds and which finally brought them the cherished goals of freedom and sovereignty. It also ensured that the reputations of the two great Sikh leaders involved-Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, *Padshah* of the *Panth* and commander-in-Chief of the army, without whom the massacre would have been complete, and Charat Singh Suckerchakia, grandfather of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, soared across north India for their sheer courage, grit and patriotism.

**Invasion from Northwest:** Ahmad Shah Durrani was part of a long line of conquerors that invaded Punjab since Mahmud of Ghazni in 1001. He first invaded in 1748. By 1752 the Mughal Emperor had ceded Punjab and other territory. In 1756-7, on his fourth invasion of Hindustan he comprehensively looted Delhi, Mathura and Brindavan and massacred thousands. The wealth that Ahmad Shah took back required 28000 elephants, camels, bullocks and mules. His army of 80000 horse and foot accompanied him with their own loot and slaves. He came for loot and revenue. His Empire, which included Afghanistan, Baluchistan, territory in the Makran coast, Khorasan, Punjab, Sind, Kashmir and Sirhind, required a standing army of 100,000 and this needed extraordinary financial resources. India was crucial to his strategy because it provided 70% of these. Without India he would be an essentially local Chieftain engrossed in petty rivalries with his Persian and Afghan counterparts. Anyone who came in the way of his purpose had to be annihilated. There was too simply too much at stake. The Marathas were powerful, had made inroads into Punjab and helped Adina Beg Khan regain the Governorship at Lahore in 1760 at the expense of his nominees. Ahmad Shah crushed them at Panipat in 1761. In 1762 he came to deal specifically with the Sikhs in a manner that would remove forever their threat to his Empire.

**Sacrifice & Valour:** The Sikhs had come a long way since Sikhism started by Guru Nanak first took root in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. The faith started having military overtones under Guru Hargobind as a result of Mughal excesses. The Sikhs gained a sense of community under subsequent Gurus helped particularly by the martyrdoms of Guru Arjun and Guru Tegh Bahadur. It was however Guru Gobind Singh, the 10<sup>th</sup> and last Guru, who revolutionized Sikh society by creating the *Khalsa* and transforming 'a sect of pacifists into a militant brotherhood of crusaders' (Khushwant Singh, *History of the Sikhs* Volume I) He passed away 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). Banda Bahadur who followed gave the Sikhs a taste of sovereignty. It was left to those who came after his death in 1715 – Kapur Singh, Budh Singh Suckerchakia, Bagh Singh Hollowalia, Bhai Mani Singh

and others who simply refused to give in to Mughal authority. Whilst the Sikhs were on the receiving end they were a force to be reckoned with by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Younger, more daring and courageous individuals had emerged and the Sikhs were now united for a common purpose with a unified central command of their army, the Dal Khalsa, divided into 11 *Misls* or divisions and further into the Budha and Taruna Dal, both under the supreme leadership of the popularly elected Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. They met twice yearly at *Baisakhi* and *Diwali* at Amritsar, a town which now had emotional significance. *Gurmatas* or resolutions passed were binding on all Chiefs. A mass movement was rapidly building up in support of the cause which was to play a crucial role in the struggle. This had something to do with the enthusiasm created by the victories of the *Khalsa* over the Mughals and Afghans. So their perceptions changed making them bolder and going all out for sovereignty.

**Liberating Heartland:** Amritsar was captured from Salabat Khan in 1748. Large areas of Punjab were brought under their influence through *Rakhi* or protection money. They had defeated Adina Beg Khan in 1757, then marched with Adina Beg Khan on Jalandhar and defeated and expelled the Afghans at Mehilpur (1757) and then helped the Marathas to attack Sirhind and then help them and Adina Beg to expel the Afghans from Lahore (1758). They had risen in revolt everywhere and were often successfully relieved Ahmad Shah of much of his booty. Even after his great victory at Panipat in 1761 Ahmad Shah's army was harassed and harried for war stores, guns, ammunition and horses! On his way back, in a daring daylight attack near Goindwal, Jassa Singh Ahluwalia forcibly secured the release of 2200 Hindu girls being taken to Afghanistan as slaves. His reputation soared as the defender of both Hindus and Sikhs, being now referred to as *Bhandi Chhor* (Liberator). As soon as Ahmad Shah left Punjab, Charat Singh Suckerchakia defeated and killed Mirza Jan, the Faujdar of Chahar Mahal. Ahmad Shah sent a cavalry force of 12000 under Nooruddin Thamezei and this too was defeated. In retaliation the Lahore Administrator encircled Gujranwala, Charat Singh's base. Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, Hari Singh Bhangi, Lehna Singh and Gujar Singh defeated him. The joint Sikh forces were to conquer Lahore in 1761. Jassa Singh Ahluwalia was declared *padshah* and coins were struck! Jassa Singh further drove away the Afghan Administrators of the Jalandhar Doab-Saddat Khan and Saddiq Beg while Charat Singh and the Bhangi Sardars conquered the whole territory north of Lahore. Ahmad Shah was naturally furious. Acting upon a *Gurmata* at the Diwali of 1761, the *Khalsa* commenced removing all pockets of Afghan resistance in Punjab. A showdown between Ahmad Shah and Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and the Sikhs was now inevitable. Jandiala was attacked first. Mahant Akhil Das, the Durrani representative, refused to surrender and immediately sent camel riders to inform Ahmad Shah, who unknown to him or the Sikhs was already on his way into Punjab. The fort in Lahore was still in the hands of Afghans and when Jassa Singh Ahluwalia learnt of Ahmad Shah's movements and in order not to be caught between the Afghans at Lahore and Ahmad Shah's troops, he immediately ordered the evacuation of Lahore and also raised the siege of Jandiala. He realized that it would be safer to send their families south to the Malwa desert area which had a predominantly Sikh population and so 50000 including the *Khalsa* escort started their movement to the South. Ahmad Shah, informed of the great numbers of Sikhs leaving for the south, first went to Jandiala to catch them. He missed them by a hairs breath. His return to Lahore and the rumours he spread that his object was Delhi and beyond, made the Sikhs, spread out over a few miles, become complacent and removed the urgency from their march. When Ahmad Shah received news from Bhikan Khan, the Nawab of Malerkotla, that the Sikhs were at Kup, 6 miles north of Malerkotla with their *Bahir* or caravan at Pind

Garma, a few miles away, he was thrilled at this chance. They had always managed to frustrate his designs by disappearing into the jungles of Amritsar. He would not let this opportunity slip away.

**The Invasion:** Ahmad Shah, the greatest conqueror of his time was to show his true qualities of generalship. He took a large force of horsemen consisting of *Ghulam Shahis* (royal slaves) mostly kept in reserve and equipped with short light blunderbusses with a heavy caliber (*sher-bachas*), and light cavalry armed with lances and broadswords. With an ability inherited from the Turko-Persian tradition based upon long distance forays in the arid zones of the Middle East and Central Asia, he covered 200 miles in less than 36 hours, having crossed both the Rivers Sutlej and Beas. He divided his army into three parts: the first part was of Shah Wali Khan, his Wazir who was to join up with Zain Khan, the Governor of Sirhind and Bhikan Khan; the other was under his most distinguished General, Jahan Khan and one part under himself. This army was double the size of the Sikh fighting force of 20000.

**Counter-Attack:** The first engagement took place when Ahmad Shah ordered Zain Khan to engage the Sikhs. On seeing these troops under his Captain Qasim Khan, the hero of Patti, the Sikhs were shocked and surprised and immediately galloped towards their *Bahir*. Qasim Khan, gave chase but the Sikhs turned round and charged him with great effect so that he fled to Malerkotla. Captain, Murtaza Khan with 500 horse however stood his ground and so delayed the advance of the Sikhs. As soon as they had dealt with Murtaza Khan, they were surprised to see the main body of the Afghans under Shah Wali Khan and Bhikan Khan blocking their way to Pind Garma. This enabled part of their troop to mercilessly, slaughter the Sikhs in the *Bahir*. The Sikhs were now surrounded from 3 sides with another arm of Zain Khan's army coming from the north. The Sikhs who normally preferred to use *Dhai Phat* or hit and run tactics, had now to undertake a pitched battle in which they knew the better trained and disciplined Afghans had the upper hand. Upon Charat Singh's advice, the army was formed into solid squares, with the best men in charge to protect each side of the square. Also present were Baghel Singh, Jai Singh Kanhaiya, Shahid Natha Singh, the Nishawalias, the Dallewalias, and others. They then rode out to face the Afghan onslaught. The Sikhs though slowed down could not be scattered much to Ahmad Shah's frustration and managed to reach their

*Bahir*. It was here that the inspired generalship of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia came into play.

**Human Wall:** With a view to ensuring the safety to their women and children spread over many miles, the Sikhs formed a human wall around the caravan and proceeded slowly towards Barnala, the territory of a co-religionist, Ala Singh of Patiala, where they felt they would be safe. Any other manouvre would have resulted in an unthinkable conclusion for the entire *Bahir*. They fought as they moved all the time trying to protect the caravan. This bold manouvre was supervised personally by Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and Charat Singh Suckerchakia. Ahmad Shah seeing that their circle was not being penetrated, sent Jahan Khan with 8000 troops. As at Panipat, Ahmad Shah had this reserve detachment of seasoned troops which he used with devastating effect. The cordon around their families was spread thinly and whilst the Sikhs still kept edging towards Barnala, it became easy for the Afghans to cause a breach. The cordon was to give way in many places resulting in mass slaughter, given there were no armed fighters within the *Bahir*. Despite shows of great personal bravery the Sikhs, already outnumbered, were outmanouvered.

In the late afternoon, the remnants of the Caravan reached the villages of Kutaba and Bahmni. May rushed into these villages for shelter only to find hostile Afghans. The Ranghars of these villages attacked the Sikhs and although they were beaten back,

enormous damage had been done. The Afghans finally stopped at a pond near these two villages. Their men and horses were exhausted after riding 36 hours of riding from Lahore and then with 10 hours of fighting! Skirmishes continued till Barnala 40 miles from Kup but the Afghans had had enough. They had had their fill of killing for one lifetime and the Sikhs taught enough of a lesson. But this was not the end for the Sikhs. In some villages they would get no help because of possible Afghan reprisals and further trouble from the Brar tribes who had turned against them.

**Brutalities:** By the time of casualties were counted there were 25000 dead including the women, children and elderly. Ahmad Shah carried 50 cartloads of Sikh heads to Lahore belonging to the slain in battle and erected large pyramids. He also took many captives. The two original volumes of the Holy Granth from Amritsar and Dam-Dama Sahib were lost to the Afghans. There was not a single warrior who was not wounded. Charat Singh 'could not count the wounds he received from the arrows, spears and swords of the enemy' and Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, at the forefront of the fighting, received 67 wounds! But approximately 25000 had survived. They had fought a pitched battle and knew they could do it again with a good chance of victory.

Ahmad Shah was to proceed towards Amritsar and blow up the Harmandar Sahib until not a brick remained. It is said that a flying piece of mortar hit his nose during these proceedings resulting in a wound and then an incurable ulcer which disfigured his face and ultimately led to his death years later! The Tank was filled up with earth and the entrails of dead cows. Ahmad Shah felt sure he had destroyed their backbone and could now attack and loot Hindustan at will. How wrong he was!

Rather harshly, a Nihang was quoted as saying, after the massacre, that "whilst the alloy had been purged, the true Khalsa was intact". He probably really meant that the Sikh spirit of defiance lived on despite the losses! This spirit was to show itself immediately afterwards. While Ahmad Shah was still at Lahore, Jassa Singh Ahluwalia attacked Sirhind and extracted a tidy sum from the Governor, Zain Khan. Ahmad Shah stayed on in Punjab till the winter. He was amazed that the Sikhs had once again started their activities against him. So when he learnt that the entire Sikh nation had gathered at Amritsar for the Diwali festival on 17<sup>th</sup> October, he resolved to destroy them completely and marched to Lahore. Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, 'the Mountain' with all the Chiefs and their armies met Ahmad Shah in battle. The Sikhs realizing that their quest for freedom and sovereignty would be shattered with defeat, fought with a primeval ferociousness. Proximity to Amritsar helped morale. The pitched battle lasted the entire day and ended with Ahmad Shah retiring back to Lahore. Jassa Singh Ahluwalia's victory was in no way complete or comprehensive, the battle being fought with an army smaller than that of his. Nevertheless, as with the Mongols defeated by the Mamelukes of Egypt at the battle of Ayn Jalut (modern Syria) in 1260, it shattered the myth of Afghan invincibility. The Sikhs realized that ultimate victory could and indeed would be theirs.

**Liberation:** By 1768 Punjab was to be completely free. Ahmad Shah left in December, 1762. By early 1763 Hari Singh Bhangi took Kasur, the largest Afghan pocket in Punjab. The Jalandhar Doab was retaken by Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. Charat Singh Suckerchakia and Hari Singh Bhangi defeated Jahan Khan at Sialkot in November, 1763 and Jassa Singh Ahluwalia defeated and killed Bhikan Khan, Nawab of Malerkotla. Sirhind was recaptured in 1764 and the territory distributed amongst themselves. A few weeks afterwards they arrived in Lahore and dictated terms to Kabuli Mal, the Governor. Ahmad Shah was to return with an army of 30000. He went upto Sirhind and was attacked on his way back by all the major Misl Chiefs-Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, Charat Singh Suckerchakia, the Bhangis, Jassa Singh

Ramgarhia and Jai Singh Kahaiya – Ahmad Shah was repeatedly attacked and realized that his authority was limited to no more than his camp. In April, 1765 the Bhangi Sardars captured Lahore. It was Lehna Singh's benign administration that changed the heart of the populace towards the Sikhs. Ahmad Shah came to Punjab for the 8<sup>th</sup> time in 1766, once again to remove the Sikh menace. In Lahore he found the populace well disposed to the Sikhs, offered Lehna Singh the Governorship only to be politely refused. Ahmad Shah was frustrated and confused.

The Sikhs would not fight him and they would spurn his friendship. In January, 1767 Jahan Khan audaciously attacked Amritsar and was thoroughly thrashed. Ahmad Shah during this invasion tried to reach Delhi but the Sikhs simply would not let him. They hovered over him and harried him. Finally he gave up and went back. The only power now left in Hindustan who was allied to Ahmad Shah was Najib-ud-Daulah, the Rohilla Chief whose territories the Sikhs had begun to devastate. He did have initial victories but was defeated in 1768.

This was the last bastion of Afghan rule. Punjab was now free after 800 years! Ahmad Shah was to come again – in 1769. This was his ninth and final attempt but this time he was even unable to cross the Jhelum! In 1783 Jassa Singh, who attacked Delhi and the environs with 40000 horse, to prove a point, sat on the throne of Delhi! **With the defence of Punjab, the gateway to India, and the subjugation of the Mughals, Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and the Sikh Chiefs gave freedom to their countrymen and ensured the preservation of Hindu and Sikh culture and religion and this was their greatest contribution to India.**

□