

Interpid Warrior Akali Baba Phoola Singh

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A great general and an architect of victory in battles, Baba Phula Singh was a rare example of self-less sacrifice and involvement in the building and defending of the Khalsa Raj. A zealous custodian of the Sikh ideals and institutions and guardian of the Sikh holy places, Phoola Singh occupies a unique place in the history of the Sikhs. He was born in 1761 A.D. at Shihan, a remote village in the present state of Haryana. Phoola Singh inherited his love and admiration for the Sikh values and Gursikh living from his father, Bhai Ishar Singh, who himself was a devout Sikh and well known in his area for his high moral and spiritual values. Along with many other Sikhs of the area, Bhai Ishar Singh also joined the heroic bands of the Sikhs who challenged the Afghan invader, Ahmad Shah Abdali, during his sixth invasion of India in 1762 A.D. Ishar Singh was seriously wounded in the battlefield and later succumbed to injuries. But before his death Ishar Singh managed to leave his young son to the affectionate care of Baba Narain Singh, popularly known as Akali Naina Singh. It was in the pious environs of the *Dera* of Baba Narain Singh that young Phoola Singh received his early instruction in Sikh scriptures and later his practical training in warfare. As a young lad, Phoola Singh showed signs of greatness and impressed his preceptor by his brilliance and his dedication to whatever was entrusted to him.

After completing his early education and training in traditional warfare, young Phoola Singh began his career at Anandpur Sahib as a custodian of the Sikh shrines there along with other members of Baba Narain Singh's *Jatha*. During his stay at Anandpur, he was often sent in the *Jathas* to repel enemy attacks and thus he gained valuable experience in actual warfare. Because of his ability and complete dedication to his mission, Phoola Singh became very popular with his preceptor and his colleagues in the *Jatha* so that after the death of Akali Narain Singh, young Phoola Singh was elected leader of his *Jatha*. At his elevation to the position of *Jathedar* Phoola Singh paid attention to the holy places of the Sikhs and carried out a number of improvements in their administration and daily routine.

In 1800 A.D. Phoola Singh and other members of his *Jathas* moved to Amritsar to eliminate unhealthy and un-Sikhlike practices that had slowly crept into the Sikh holy places there. With the help of his dedicated band of followers, Akali Phoola Singh was able to bring about some major improvements in the administration of the Golden Temple, the Akal Takht and other important shrines in Amritsar. It was during his stay at Amritsar that Akali Phoola Singh first met Maharaja Ranjit Singh who had led an invasion against the Bhangi chief in possession of that city. Phoola Singh's love for his community did not allow him to helplessly watch this fratricidal war between the two Sikh chiefs. Accordingly, he intervened and with his influence and sagacity brought about a peaceful settlement between Ranjit Singh and the Bhangi chief. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was highly impressed by Akali Phoola Singh's love for his community and his deep involvement for the Sikh causes. Then onward, the Maharaja became a great admirer of this fearless Akali leader.

During his campaign against Qutubdin Khan, the Governor of Kasur, in 1807, Maharaja Ranjit Singh sought the assistance of Akali Phoola Singh and his *Jatha*. In the fierce battle that ensued Qutubdin Khan was defeated but pardoned and was given a *jagir* for his maintenance. During this campaign Phoola Singh impressed the Maharaja with his rare qualities of a warrior and earned the reputation of an organizer of victories. On return from this campaign Phoola Singh and his *Jatha* moved to Damdama Sahib in the winter of 1809 in order to carry out some improvements in the administration of the Sikh shrines there.

While at Damdama Sahib, Akali Phoola Singh heard a rumour about an attack on the Punjab by the British forces. In order to forestall the enemy move Phoola Singh marched with his bands of Akalis and attacked the British troops under Captain White encamped near Fatoh-ke Village near Nabha. In his anxiety to save the Khalsa Raj, which he cherished the most, Akali Phoola Singh seems to have quite ignored the political expediencies and was prepared to risk his life to defend the Sikh kingdom against the evil designs of the British rulers in India.

The growing popularity of Akali Phoola Singh along with his bold and fearless nature and frank criticism of the acts of omission and commission of the high officials at the Lahore Durbar seem to have encouraged some vested interests to combine against Phoola Singh by poisoning the ears of Maharaja Ranjit Singh against this powerful Akali chief. Thus when Phoola Singh went to Lahore to meet the Maharaja and to warn him against the intrigues of his courtiers who were trying to create a rift between him and his son and heir-apparent, Prince Kharak Singh, these selfish officials of the Maharaja managed to delay Akali Phoola Singh seeking an audience with the Maharaja. After a long wait Phoola Singh took the initiative of walking into the Maharaja's palace without waiting for a formal appointment. During his meeting with the Maharaja, Phoola Singh boldly pointed out the danger involved in Maharaja's policy of entrusting responsible positions to persons with doubtful credentials and warned him against the intrigues of his selfish nobles, who were trying to create a rift between the father and son for selfish gains. When asked to partake food with the Maharaja, the fearless Akali refused to accept anything at his hands till the Maharaja made necessary amends.

After this incident, Akali Phoola Singh marched to Anandpur Sahib along with other members of the *Jatha*. The Maharaja, who was fully convinced of the Akali leader's genuine love for the Sikh kingdom and his uncompromising nature, brought Akali Phoola Singh back to Amritsar through the good offices of a revered Sikh sage, Baba Sahib Singh Bedi. As a token of his gratitude and love for the Akali leader, the Maharaja offered elephants, horses and other useful materials for use by the members of Phoola Singh's *Jatha*. The Maharaja also got regular barracks made at Amritsar for the lodging of his *Jatha*, which later developed as headquarters of the Nihang Singhs and came to be known as the "*Akalian-di-Chhauni*" or the Akali cantonment.

Amity being restored between the Maharaja and Akali Phoola Singh, this great general became a source of immense encouragement and help to Ranjit Singh in his major military campaigns. The fearless leadership of Akali Phoola Singh provided indispensable support to Maharaja Ranjit Singh during his military campaigns against the rulers of Multan, Bahawalpur and Sind. The important role played by Akali Phoola Singh during the Maharaja's campaign against Multan has been thus recorded in a near contemporary account "Ranjit Singh's whole army would have been repulsed from Multan had not Phoola Singh, a mad Akali, borrowed from Bacieline the courage to lead a storming party against the breach."

During Ranjit Singh's campaign to annex Peshawar to his kingdom in 1818 when his forces had suffered heavy losses and chances of victory were very bleak, the fearless Akali Phoola Singh was sent by the Maharaja to save the situation. The timely arrival of Akali Phoola Singh on the battlefield turned this impending rout into a grand victory and the ruler of Peshawar surrendered before this great general of the Maharaja. In subsequent years, Phoola Singh and his contingent helped Maharaja Ranjit Singh in his conquest of the beautiful valley of Kashmir. Ranjit Singh was so much impressed with the rare qualities of Akali Phoola Singh that after the victory of Kashmir he requested him to stay in the constant

company of the Maharaja at the Lahore Durbar. But given as he was to an independent life, away from the grandeurs of the royalty, he refused this invitation and returned to his camp at Amritsar to devote himself to the work of administration of the Sikh holy places there. In 1823, Akali Phoola Singh was called upon to join the Maharaja in his campaigns against the frontier tribes. It was during these campaigns that Akali Phoola Singh demonstrated not only his proverbial bravery and loyalty to the Khalsa Raj but also his adherence to the Sikh prayer and died fighting rather than retreat and thus go back from the promise made in the solemn presence of the Guru Granth Sahib. In the battle of Naushehra, Akali Phoola Singh marched after saying his prayer and in spite of repeated efforts of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and other high officials refused to halt till the reinforcements had arrived. In the fierce battle even after having been pierced with bullets all over his body, he continued the fight and breathed his last only after ensuring victory for the Khalsa.

Akali Phoola Singh was cremated at Pirsabak, four miles east of Naushehra, with full military honours with Maharaja Ranjit Singh and other high officials attending the funeral. To perpetuate the memory of this grand old man, the Maharaja got a Samadhi made at the place of his cremation and attached a big *jagir* for its maintenance. Another memorial, known as Burj Akali Phoola Singh, was later erected in the sacred city of Amritsar where Akali Phoola Singh had spent most of his time when free from military campaigns. While the Samadhi of Phoola Singh has been left in Pakistan after the partition of the country, the Burj at Amritsar has developed into a sort of headquarters for the Nihangs for whom Phoola Singh remains their *beau ideal*.

Because of Akali Phoola Singh's significant contribution in almost all the important military campaigns of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and in view of his role in ensuring victories therein, Phoola Singh was honoured with the befitting title of the builder and defender of the Khalsa Raj. A rare example of selfless sacrifice, a fearless fighter and organizer of victories, a genuine lover and builder and defender of the Khalsa Raj, a devout Sikh and zealous guardian of the Sikh morals, Phoola Singh occupies a unique place in the history of the Sikhs.

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