

Skirmishes and Sikhism after Banda's Execution in Punjab

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Abstract

Banda Singh was martyred in 1716. The religious persecution of the Sikhs started immediately after that. They were outlawed by the Mughal emperor and Governors. No laws protected their lands or property. They were attacked and murdered and their houses were looted. Thousands of Sikhs lost their lives like this. The remaining Sikhs retreated into the forests hills and desert. They firmly believed in Guru GobindGobind Singh's prophecy that the Sikhs would rule the country one day. Some time they will come out of the forests to attack the government forces. The Government was getting more frustrated with them. A proclamation was made that the Sikhs should be wiped out from the province. It was declared that financial sums would be given to the people who will kill the Sikhs and will bring their heads as a proof to the

capital. This practice went on for many years. The religious persecution went on for about thirty years. The period between 1716 to 1733 was the darkest period of the Sikh history. The policy of Mughal Emperors and Governors; Abdul Samas Khan and Zakriya Khan, was total extinction of Sikhs. The Sikh spirits were kept high by their petty but brave leaders, each of them either died fighting or executed and wrought havoc in the ranks of enemies. The Government was weakened by the attacks from Ahmad Shah Abdali, an Afghan king. Sikhs started retreating towards the safer areas and gathered in the form of Bands under different leaders.

Keywords : *Sikh, Khalsa, Tat-Khalsa, FatehDarshan, Baisakhi, Faujdar, Langar, Haidri, Nawab, Jagir, Jatha, Mela, Granth, Taruna-Dal, Buddha-Dal.*

Contents

The execution of Banda Singh Bahadur dealt a great blow to the power of Sikh in the Punjab. The Mughal emperor Farrukh Siyar, after crushing Banda and his followers decided to exterminate the Sikhs. He issued an edict in the direction of the state officials that every Sikh, falling into their hands should, on refusal to embrace Islam, be put to death. Forster says that such was the keen spirit that animated the persecution, such was the success of their exertions that the name of a Sikh no longer existed in the Mughal dominions.

On the other hand after the death of Banda the Sikhs were left without any leader. They had no one to guide them. Most of the weak-minded Sikhs, on account of the fear of persecution, ceased to keep long hair and began to style themselves as 'Khalasas' or 'Sahajdharis' to slow-adopters. The strong among them however, kept long hair but even they were not strong enough to resist the mighty Mughal Empire. They were divided into two distinct groups; The 'Tat Khalsa' and the 'Bandai Khalsa'. The Tat Khalsa did not hold Banda as their spiritual guru. They worshiped the 'Adi Granth' as their Guru. They repudiated the salutation and war-cry of Banda 'Fateh Dhram' or 'Fateh Darshan'

and insisted that they should greet 'Wah Gurujika Khalsa, Wah gurujiki Fateh' (i.e. the Khalsa belongs to the Lord and the victory too belongs to him), the salutation introduced by Guru Gobind Singh. The 'Tat Khalsa' unlike the Bandai Khalsa, did not adopt the red dress, but continued using the blue dress introduced by Guru Gobind Singh. Besides, the 'Tat Khalsa' adopted the meat-diet which the Bandais considered taboo. Thus, the disunity in the ranks of Sikhs coupled with the edict of Farrukh Siyar to exterminate them, greatly demoralized them and, according to Forster, a number of Sikhs even cut off their long hair for fear of persecution and began to lead a peaceful life. But still there were many who did not submit to that sacrilege and could not enjoy the elementary rights of citizenship in any town or village of the Punjab. They were, consequently, forced to take shelter in hills and forests. Thus, for some time, i.e. from 1716 to 1720, there was a complete black-out of the activities of the Sikhs in the history of the Punjab.

In course of time, and on account of the fact that the Sikhs had taken shelter in the hills and the forests, the Mughal officials in the Punjab grew slack in the enforcement of Farrukh Siyar's edict. Besides, the Mughal Samad Khan, then an

old man, did not care to persecute the Sikhs strictly according to his edict, after the death of FarrukhSiart in 1710. The result was that the Sikhs Gradually came back from their hill and jungle retreats and again settled in large numbers at Amritsar to celebrate the Diwaliand Baisakhi with theirunusual fervor and enthusiasm though they met in large numbers at the time of the great Hindu Festivals, yet they could not chalk out a common programme of action for their safety and survival.

Guru Gobind Singh Wife Mata Sundri, commissioned Bhai Mani Singh, Head- Granthi of the Darbar Sahib or High Priest of the Golden Temple, Amritsar, to settle the difference of the two sects of the Sikhs – The ‘Tat Khalsa’ and the ‘Bandai Sikhs’ consequently, he called the leaders of both the Sikhs parties- Baba Kahansingh, son of Baba Binodsingh representing the Tat Khalsa and Mahant Singh of Khem Karan representing the ‘Bandais’. It was agreed by them that their respective claims be decided by casting of lots. Accordingly, two slips of paper were taken. One was written ‘wahGurujikiFateh’ and another ‘FatehDarshan’. It was settled before hand that both the slips would be submerged in the water of the sacred tank if the slips bearing ‘wahgurujikiFateh’

would rise first to the surface, then the ‘Bandai’Sikhs would join the Khalsa. On the other hand, if the slip bearing ‘FatehDarshan’ would rise to the surface first, then the ‘Tat Khalsa’ would join the rank of Bandai Sikh. Thus the both the slips were immersed in the water at Har Ki Pauri and to the good Fortune of the ‘Tat Khalsa’ their slip came to the surface first. That was a great victory for the Tat Khalsa. But some of the Bandais, even after that incident, refused to join the ranks of the Khalsa, saying that the lots were not cast in a fair manner. At last, it was decided that a duel be fought in front of the Akal Takht between the representative of the two group. In that too Tat Khalsa came out victorious. But even after the duel, some Bandais held out. They were driven out of the temple by force and it was in scuffle that the leader of the Bandai Sikhs, Mahant Singh, was killed. The unfavorable lot, the defeat in the duel and the death of their leader, at last demoralized the ‘Bandais’ and most of them Joined the ranks of the Tat Khalsa.

Once the Sikhs were united, they again began to assert themselves even at the point of the swords. They took the offensive against those Hindu and Muslim officials who would not let them live a decent life and even inflicted a

crushing defeat on a strong Muslim force under Aslam Khan sent by the Lahore Governor to chastise them. At last, The Mughal government at Delhi transferred Abdul Samad Khan from Lahore to Multan. His son Khan Bahadur Zakriya Khan was given the charge of the Lahore Province with specific instructions to crush the Sikhs. Khan Bahadur Zakriya Khan took charge of the Punjab in 1726. He adopted very stern measures against the Sikhs. He organized punitive parties to hunt out the Sikhs from their retreats in hills and jungles. The Sikhs were arrested wholesale and brought to a public place called 'Nakhas' or market place outside the Delhi Gate in Lahore. There, they were tortured and beheaded. This place is now known as Shahidganj.

With such a Governor in the Punjab, the Sikhs again could not lead a peaceful life. They once more retired to the hills and the forest and lived a life of great hardship. It was during that period that they coined strange names for eatables and movable property, so that the enemy should not understand their real position. But the Sikhs, in spite of all that persecution, did not lose heart. They took pleasure in their miserable plight, for they were men of faith. They thought that their sufferings were due to the will of the Guru and

would soon end. They were sure that one-day the Khalsa would rule. Thus, though they lived as outlaws, they came to the plains and collect food and provisions from the Hindus and The Sikhs who sympathized with their cause.

The Period of hardship for the Sikhs closes with the incident of Tara Singh of Van. Bhai Tara Singh quarreled with a Hindu official, Sahib Rai of Nowshara Dalla, and the latter into your beard and long hair. A Sikh, for whom the hair is so sacred, could not tolerate that threat. Tara Singh, therefore, took away one of the mares of Sahib Rai, sold it and credited the money to the Guru's 'Langar'. Sahib Rai thereupon asked Jaffar Beg, The Faujdar of Patti, to help him in punishing the Sikh. At once a force of more than one hundred soldiers was sent against Tara Singh, but it was defeated. Even the nephew of the Faujdar was killed in the skirmish. At last, a big force of more than 2000 men was sent against Tara Singh. With only 22 Sikhs, Tara Singh fought against that force for a whole night and when the sun rose, the Mughals were surprised to find that they had not been able to overpower even 22 men. They made one great attack and all the 22 including Tara Singh, were killed.

The bravery of those 22 Sikhs touches the heart of the Sikhs who, out of fear, had gone to

the jungles for safety. They then realized that if they could fight with the same bravery and courage as Tara Singh of Van had done, they could easily put and end the tyranny of the Mughals in Punjab. So, they came out of their retreats and began to harass the Mughal Officials. Sikhs started attack at the time they were removing the treasures from one place to another the result of those surprise attacks was that Zakriya Khan sought the help of the Muslim Population of the Punjab in crushing the Sikhs. He appealed to their fanaticism and in a short time the flower of the entire Muslim Punjab assembled at Lahore and raised the 'Haidri' flag. The Balochis and the Sayids, Mughals and the Pathans, the Bhattis and Jatsm the Ranghars and the Rajputs and even the Telis the Mochis, the Doods, The Jullahas, The Gujjars, The Dogtas, The Sainis and the Arrains, all joined in the 'Jehad' or holy war against the Sikhs. That force which numbered several lakhs set out under the command of Mir InnayatUllah to extirpate the bearded ruffians as the Sikhs were then contemptuously called.

When Sikhs learnt about the raising of the 'Haidari' flag, they first retired to their distant retreats and of then after a few days took the Muslims unaware and wrought immense havoc

among them they also took away large quantities of ammunition and a great number of horses. Thus, about six to seven thousand Sikhs defeated lakhs of Muslims. Meanwhile the Sikhs organized themselves into Bands. At last, one day the Sikhs fell upon the 'Ghazis' who had raised the Haidari flag in the neighborhoods of Bhilowal and completely annihilated them.

When the policy of persecution failed, Zakriya Khan tried to placate the Sikhs. In 1733, he sent a message through a Sikh contractor Sube Singh to the Sikhs who were meeting at Akal Takht, asking them that their leader should accept the title of 'Nawab' from the Mughal government and also receive a Jagir of the value of one lakh of rupees a year. At first, Sikhs rejected the offer, but after the matter had been discussed thread-bare, they agreed that the title of 'Nawab' and the Jagir should be given to KapursinghFaizulpuria who was at the fanning the Sikh gathering.

Thus, after more than two decades, an understanding was arrived at between the Mughal Government of Punjab and the Sikhs. Zakriya Khan had hoped that with that understanding the Sikh would give up the life of loot and plunders and would take the plough, but he was mistaken. The Sikhs, by that time had

become essentially soldiers, and when they got breathing space and money they reorganized themselves into 'Jathas' or Bands. All the Jathas constituted the "Dal Khalsa." There were two main divisions of this "dal" – the 'Buddha Dal' and 'Taruna Dal'. The Buddha dal was the army of the elders and the Taruna Dal was the army of the young, was divided into five Jathas consisted of thirteen hundred to two thousand men and had its own Drum and banner. Each had separate headquarters.

Those Bands of the Dal Khalsa and, particularly of Taruna Dal, continued to be a source of great trouble to the Mughals in the Punjab throughout the thirties. They overran the whole of the Bari Doab and some of them even crossed the Satluj and assisted Alasingh to establish a small state in the 'Malwa' region of the Punjab, Khan Bahadur Zakriya Khan sent a force under Diwan Lakhpat Rai against those Bands of the Dal Khalsa. Lakhpat Rai succeeds in defeating them, and set a military post in Amritsar. When Zakriya Khan and Diwan Lakhpat Rai set up a military post at Amritsar and banned the meetings of the Sikhs in the Harmandir, Mani Singh protested against such policy.

In 1733, he hit upon a plan. He approached Zakriya Khan with the request of that he would pay Rs. Ten thousand out of the offering the Sikhs if he were permitted to celebrate the Diwali festival at Amritsar. The greedy Governor gave the permission but just on the eve of the fair when the Sikhs had not yet made their offerings at the temple, Zakriya took them unaware and consequently, the Mela (fair) broke up. Bhai Mani Singh was not able to pay money in result of that Bhai Mani Singh arrested and offered him the usual choice between Islam or execution. On his refusal to swerve from his faith, he was cut to pieces limb by limb 1734.

The execution of Bhai Mani Singh aroused deep feelings of resentment and revenge in the mind of the Sikhs and they began to await an opportunity for vengeance. They got the chance in 1739, when Nadir Shah invaded the Punjab. While Nadir Shah was retreating from Delhi, the Sikhs Bands fell upon the rear of Nadir's army and replenished their resources by relieving it of a part of its loot from the treasures of the Imperial capital. Nadir Shah was deeply impressed by the boldness of the Sikhs. Zakriya thought seriously of the remarks of the Nadir Shah and he decided to take very stern measures against them. The Sikhs were hunted like wild

beast and most of them were obliged to quit the plains of the Punjab and retire to old resorts in the hills and the jungles. But still that policy of persecution did not damp the spirit of the devoted followers of the Gurus and they most fearlessly faced death while fighting such an organized tyranny of the enemies of their religion. Another executions of the period were that of Bhai Tara Singh and Haqiqat Rai took place.

In 1745, Khan Bahadur Zakriya Khan died and was succeeded by his son Yahiya Khan. He was in no way better than his father and continued the persecution of the Sikhs. The most important event of his period is the carnage or Ghalughara in which thousands of Sikhs were put to the sword. The Sikhs had divided themselves into Bands. Those Bands used to come out of their retreats to loot the Government treasuries and plunder rich Muslim officials in order to replenish their resources. In 1746, a number of such Sikh Bands, on their way to Eminabad, where they going to visit the Sikhs temple of Rohri Sahib, took away a few sheep and goat of the residents of Gondlanwala. Jaspal Rai, the then Faujdar of that place asked the Sikhs to return the goats to their owners and leave Eminabad. The Sikhs refuse to listen to the Faujdar. Consequently, he led a force against

them, but the Sikhs gave him a tough fight. During the course of action, Jaspal Rai was killed.

Jaspal Rai was the brother of Diwan Lakhpat Rai the Finance minister of the Lahore Governor. When Lakhpat Rai heard the murder of his brother, he swore to wreak vengeance on the Sikhs. He went to the Nawab and throwing his turban at his feet said that he would retie it on his head only when he erased the name of the Sikhs from the Punjab, so he gave the full power to Diwan Lakhpat Rai to destroy the Khalsa root and branch. Diwan Lakhpat Rai first passed a number of measures against the Sikhs. Therefore no one could utter the name of the Guru. Even the word 'gur' was not to be used. No one utter the word Granth and the word Pothi was to be used instead. The copies of holy Granth were collected and thrown into rivers. The Tank of Amritsar was filled up with earth. In that bloody campaign which is generally styled as the first or small 'Ghalughara' about seven thousand Sikhs were killed and about three thousand were captured. Those Sikhs prisoners were brought to Lahore and beheaded at the Nakhas or Shahidganj.

But Lakhpat Rai was not destined to enjoy his triumph for long towards the close of 1746,

Yahiys's younger brother, Shah Nawaz, revolted and defeated Yahiya. Shah Nawaz threw Lakhpat Rai into prison and in his place appointed Kaura Mal his Diwan. That civil war between Shah Nawaz and Yahiya Khan gave the Sikhs the much-needed respite and so, in a short time they recovered their strength.

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