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Banda Singh Bahadur: An unsung national hero

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Abstract

An attempt has been made in this paper to analyse the struggle and sacrifice of Banda Singh Bahadur against the cruelty, exploitation, inequality and injustice of Mughal Empire. His struggle and sacrifice for the society against the then Mughal Empire is remarkable in the history. The main objective of this study is to highlight the sacrifice of Banda Singh Bahadur for mankind. For this purpose, the paper has been divided into five parts. The first part deals with the early life of Banda Singh Bahadur. The second part deals with the meeting between Banda Singh Bahadur (the then Madho Das Bairagi) and Guru Gobind Singh. His march towards Punjab has been discussed in the third part of this paper. Fourth part of the study relates with the establishment of First Sikh State by him. Last part deals with his martyrdom along with his comrades. Historical and analytical approach has been adopted in this study. Both primary and secondary sources have been used in this study.

Keywords: Banda Singh Bahadur, injustice, Mughal Empire

Introduction

The province of Punjab had derived its name from its rivers (*Punj+ Aab*, the meaning five rivers), namely the Sutlej, Beas, Ravi, Chenab and Jhelum. The ancient Punjab was a part of the vast Irani Empire. But later on, the Moryas, Yunanis, Shaks, Kushans and Guptas, etc. many other powers dominated it. In the middle ages, Punjab was under the Afgan rulers. Thereafter, it remained under the rule of Khilji, Tuglak, Sayed and Lodhi. Later on the *Mughals* conquered it. The 'Bhakti Movement' became very popular during the *Mughal* rule. It found expression in the rise of the Sikh *Panth* in Punjab during the 15th and 16th centuries. The Sikh religion was evolved by a succession of ten Gurus (teachers). Guru Nanak Dev, the first Sikh Guru, was the founder of this religion. The 10th Guru, Gobind Singh gave a marshal character to the Sikh religion. He established a new order *Khalsa Panth* in a heavy gathering of his followers at Anandpur Sahib on April 13, 1699. The Sikhs fought against the *Mughal* Empire under the leadership of Guru Gobind Singh. Banda Singh Bahadur continued the struggle against the *Mughals* after Guru Gobind Singh. He was succeeded in defeating the *Mughals* in this province and established first Sikh State. The present study relates with the struggle and sacrifice of this great warrior against the *Mughal* Empire.

Early life

Before dealing with the struggle and achievements of Banda Singh Bahadur against the Mughal Empire, it may be interesting to tell very briefly about his early-life. He was born on 16th October, 1670, in the small village of Rajauri in the Poonch district (Kashmir). Historians viewed that he belonged to Bharadwaj Rajput family. He was called as Lachman Dev during his childhood. His father Ram Dev was an ordinary agriculturist. Lachman Dev had started to assist his father in farming. Besides, he went to jungles with a "teer and kamaan" (bow and arrows) for hunting and he turned into a good hunter and marksman. An incident occurred in his life in age of fifteen. He shot at a female deer on the bank of the Tavi. The deer was bounded and fell down. He went up to her and saw the deer and her two young ones in it dying. This horrible scene gave him a rude shock. He decided to give up hunting. After this event, he started leading a disappointed and disillusioned life. Now, he had no interest left in worldly affairs ^[1].

One day, a group of *Bairagi Sadhus* came at Rajauri and stayed there. Lachman Dev met this group of *Sadhus* and was very impressed by preaching of one *Sadhu* of this group named Janaki Prashad. He decided to leave his home and became the disciple of Janaki Prashad. He started moving with him. As per the customs of the *Bairagis*, Janaki Prashad changed his

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name and gave him a new name as Madho Das. Madho Das visited various places with the group of *BairagiSadhus*. He made a small hut on the bank of Godawari near Nander and started to stay there. Madho Das's hut soon developed into a big *Dera*. People came to him for his blessed sight, the treatment of their ailments through *Jantar Mantar* and for the fulfillment of their desires. Presently, a famous Gurdwara known as Gurdwara Banda Ghat stands at this place [2].

Meeting with Guru Gobind Singh

The *Mughal* rulers and their stooges were robbing Hindus and converting them to Islam forcibly during that time. Guru Gobind Singh, 10th Guru of Sikhs had waged a relentless war against the tyranny of the *Mughal* rulers. Guru Gobind Singh had come to Deccan and reached at Nander in 1707. One day Guru along with his Sikhs went to Dera of Madho Das *Bairagi* on 3 September 1708. Madho Das tried his magical art on Guru Gobind Singh but not succeeded in it. He surrendered himself to Guru Gobind Singh. He became the disciple of Guru Gobind Singh. He was called as Banda Singh Bahadur after taking *Amritpaan* on 4 September 1708 [3]. Guru Gobind Singh ordered him to go to Punjab to eliminate the tyranny of cruel *Mughal* regime. Twenty five *Singhs* were sent with Banda Singh when he left for Punjab [4].

His march towards Punjab

Banda Singh moved to Punjab after taking blessings, guidance and instructions from Guru Gobind Singh. During those days *dacoity* was common in the villages. Banda Singh took action against the dacoits very bravely and defeated them. Like the fight against the dacoits, Banda Singh appealed to masses to fight against the injustice and tyranny of the *Mughal* rulers. People responded admirably to his appeal. As a result, the number of his followers was increased.⁵Now Banda Singh decided to attack on Samana on 11th November 1709 of early in the morning. Some *Mughals* and *Sayyads* fought bravely but almost all of them either were put to death by the Sikh army or they had fled the city to save their lives. By the evening, the Sikhs were in possession of the town and the main fort [6]. Banda Singh also captured Ghuram, Sanaur, Thaska, Thaneswar, Shahabad and Mustafabad before attacking on Sadhaura.

When Banda Singh was going to Sadhaura, a group of local Hindus of the area near Kapuri told him about the atrocities of Kadam-ud-Din, the chief of Kapuri and requested to punish him. Kadam-ud-Din was a cruel person and hated with Hindus. He had set up a special gang of his soldiers to carry away pretty and young Hindu girls for his sexual pleasure. Banda Singh's army immediately marched towards Kapuri. Kadam-ud-Din's soldiers had fled and left him alone. He had shut himself in his mansion. Sikhs set fire on mansion in which he got burnt [7].

Banda Singh's next expedition was against Sadhaura which was a powerful stronghold of *Mughals*. Usman Khan was the ruler of this city who was a tyrant and notorious. He was against the Hindus and the Sikhs. There was hardly a Hindu woman whose chastity had not been violated by him. Cows were slaughtered in front of the houses of Hindus. Even Hindus were not permitted to perform their religious ceremonies. He had imposed four times much tax upon Hindus as compared to Muslims. The Sikhs had fought bravely and succeeded to capture the Sadhaura. The

Mughals had surrendered and begged for mercy from the Sikhs. Usman Khan was also captured and he was given death sentence [8].

Now, Banda Singh decided to attack on Sirhind. Wazir Khan, the chief of Sirhind proclaimed a *Jehad* (Islamic war) against the *kafirs* (Sikhs) and received a positive response from large number of *Ghazis*. The battle took place in the field of Chappar Chiri on 22th May, 1710. Banda Singh's army entered in Sirhind on 24th May 1710. The Muslim inhabitants were put to death and the city was plundered. Wazir Khan was killed in this battle. After the victory, Banda Bahadur had established his own government here [9].

Establishment of Sikh state

Under the leadership of Banda Singh Bahadur, the Sikhs had made owner all the regions of Punjab from Lahore to Delhi within a less than a time period of one year (November 1709- September 1710). He decided to establish the capital of Sikh Kingdom at Mukhlispur and gave it a new name as Lohgarh. The entire treasure of Sirhind, other booties, *nazranas* and revenue collected from the various places conquered were brought and stored at Lohgarh, the safest resort. Now, he became a virtual king and directed the work of his government from this place. He issued a coin, a symbol of sovereignty, and the seal in the name of Guru Nanak Dev and Guru Gobind Singh. He also issued a new calendar for Sikhs (new *Sammat*) [10]. The victories and progress of Banda Singh inspired the people to join Sikhism. Banda Singh soon became popular as the defender of the Sikh faith and the champion of the oppressed. He started holding regular *durbars* where people came and represented to him their grievances and he spared no pains in redressing their wrongs. In this way, he won the sympathy and love of the common man.

Surrender and Martyrdom

Emperor Farukh Syer issued the order to Abdus Samad Khan, the Governor of Lahore, to take immediate action against Banda Singh. All the *Faujdar*s and *Jagirdar*s of Punjab were directed to join Abdus Samad Khan at Lahore. All Hindu rulers of hill areas except Mandi, Kullu and Malabar were also joined *Mughal* army under the command of Abdus Samad Khan against Banda Singh. The combined *Mughal* forces reached at Gurdaspur Nangal and attacked the Sikh army and besieged the fortress. The number of the *Mughal* and Hindu hill soldiers was more than fifty times than that of the Sikhs in the fortress. The combined forces under the command of Abdus Samad Khan, was succeeded to occupy the fortress and capture Banda Singh along with his companions on 7 December 1715 after a siege of eight months. About three hundred Sikhs were put to death on the support and their heads had been severed. The wife of Banda Singh and her five year old son Ajay Singh were also arrested. Banda Singh was fettered by the *Mughals* and put in an iron cage. Arrested Sikh soldiers were also tied with ropes. Banda Singh and his comrades were brought to Delhi from Gurdas Nangal. The procession of Sikh prisoners entered at Delhi on 29 February 1716 and paraded in a procession through the streets of Delhi [11].

Banda Singh and eighteen of his leading comrades like Baj Singh, Fateh Singh, Ram Singh, Ali Singh and Gulab Singh Bakshi etc. were handed over to Ibrahim-ud-Din Khan Mir-Atish and imprisoned at the Tripolia Fort. They were

tortured for next three months. The wife and son of Banda Singh were taken away by Darbar Khan Nazir of the Harem^[12]. Other Sikh prisoners were handed over to Sarbrah-Khan Kotwal, for execution. The execution began on 5 March 1716. G. S. Deol writes that one hundred of them were taken out of their prison every day and were beheaded. Before execution, everybody was offered pardon, if he accepted Islam but every brave Sikh flatly refused that offered and welcomed death with undaunted spirit and presented their heads to the executioners. Messrs John Sermon and Edward Stephenson, who were eyewitness of the executions, praised the martyrdom of the Sikhs in a letter wrote to Robert Hedges, President and Governor of Fort William and Council in Bengal on 10 March 1716^[13]. Finally, Banda Singh Bahadur, his son Ajay Singh and his leading comrades were taken out of the Fort of Delhi on 9th June 1716, in a procession under the charge of Ibrahim-Ud-Din Mir Aatish and Sarbrah Khan (Kotwal). They all were paraded through the street of the old city to the shrine of Khwaja Qutab-ud-Din Bakhtyar Kaki near Qutab Minar at Mehrauli. Banda Singh was brought down from the elephant and first of all he was paraded round the tomb of the late emperor Bahadur Shah. Then he was asked to accept either Islam or death but as a true follower and devotee of Guru Gobind Singh, he preferred to death. His four and a half years old son, Ajay Singh, was then placed in his lap and he was asked to cut his throat, which was refused to do by him. On his refusal to do so, the executioner cut the child to pieces and heart of the child was then thrust into the mouth of Banda Singh and a garland of the child's intestines was put round the neck of Banda Singh but he did not utter even a word with his tongue. Ajay Singh became the youngest martyr of the world history. Then as per the orders of the Emperor, Banda Singh's flesh was torn off with red-hot pincers and the process continued till he died. Finally he was decapitated and hacked to pieces, limb by limb. Elphinstone writes that during his tortures, Banda Singh showed unparalleled calmness and died with unshaken constancy. Khafi Khan, an eyewitness of Banda Singh's martyrdom, writes that something was happened on which nobody can faith, except eyewitness. The rest of the companions of Banda Singh were offered life if they chose to embrace Islam but not a single Sikh accepted this offer. They were killed on the same day according to Sewa Singh^[14].

Conclusions

Although Banda Singh Bahadur was crushed by the then cruel *Mughal* emperor rulers in 1716 but they had failed to crush his ideology. Banda Singh Bahadur was a great warrior who fought against the *Mughal* ranny. He was succeeded to crush the cruel regime of *Mughals* and established the first *Khalsaraj*. He move further the campaign launched by the Sikh Gurus. Although, he is known as the first Sikh Commander or Sikh ruler in the history of the Sikhs but he had a secular image among the Hindu-Sikh community. He was always supported by the peasantry class in every war with *Mughals*. Banda Singh declared the end of *Zamindari-system*. It was declared by him that those who will cultivate the land, will be the owner of the land. He waived off the tax on agriculture land. Banda Singh was the first person who brought out this revolutionary change in agriculture sector in India. He was very popular among the common people due to his

leadership quality and helping nature. He tried to build a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity by his struggle against the then *Mughal* Tyranny. His sacrifice for humanity is remarkable in the history. That is why he is respectfully known as *Baba* Banda Singh Bahadur in Sikh and Hindu Community.

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8. Deol, op.cit. p. 37-39
9. Ibid. p. 44-52.
10. Ibid. p. 56-60. Also see, Sirhindi, op.cit. p. 47-49. For details of Lohgarh fort see, Dilgeer and others, n. 3, pp 50-60.
11. Deol, op.cit. p. 92-96.
12. Teja Singh and Ganda Singh write that Banda Singh's wife and his son and the nurse of the child were taken away by Darbar Khan Nazir of the Harem.
13. Ibid. p. 97-101. The facts and figures regarding the massacre of the Sikhs and their braveness at Delhi, were also confirmed by the then English Ambassador, an eyewitness of the massacre of the Sikhs who wrote a letter to Robert Hedges, President and Governor of Fort William and Council in Bengal dated 10th March, 1716.
14. Ibid. p. 103-106.