

BANDA SINGH BAHADUR: CONQUESTS AGAINST THE MUGHAL EMPIRE

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Abstract: Banda Singh Bahadur came from a poor agriculturalist family. He was born at a time when the Mohammedan rulers and their stooges were robbing the Hindus and converting them into Islam forcibly. He left his home at the age of fifteen and became the disciple of Janki Das Bairagi and called as Madho Das Bairagi. When he became the disciple of Guru Gobind Singh, he was called as Banda Singh Bahadur. His conquests against the Mughals are remarkable in the history. He was the first Sikh warrior and commander who laid the foundation of the Sikh kingdom. The objective of this paper is to analyze the conquests of Banda Singh Bahadur against the Mughal Empire. Both primary and secondary sources have been used in this paper. The methodology has been used in this paper in a holistic manner.

Keywords: Banda Singh Bahadur, Mughal Empire, Sikh Warrior

1.0 Introduction

Banda Singh Bahadur was a great Sikh warrior. He became the commander of Khalsa army after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. He was born at a time when the Mohammedan rulers and their stooges were robbing the Hindus and converting them into Islam forcibly. He belonged to a poor agriculturalist family of Rajauri, Punch (Kashmir). At the age of fifteen, he left home to become an ascetic, and was given the name Madho Das Bairagi. He moved many places of the country. 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. Madho Das became popular very soon in the Deccan and Rajasthan. It may be noted that Guru Gobind Singh, 10th Guru of Sikhs had waged a relentless war against the tyranny of the *Mughal* rulers during those days. Guru Gobind Singh had come to Deccan and reached at Nander in 1707. Guru along with his Sikhs went to Dera of Madho Das *Bairagi* on 3 September 1708. Some dialogues took place between the both. Madho Das considered himself as a *Banda* (Slave) of Guru Gobind Singh. He became the disciple of Guru Gobind Singh. He was called as Banda Singh Bahadur after taking *Amritpaan* (Sikh ceremony of initiation or baptism) on 4 September 1708. Guru Gobind Singh had given the training to Banda Singh in the field of art of warfare. He also taught him about Sikh philosophy, history and struggle against the atrocities made by *Mughals*. When Banda Singh became fully trained, Guru Gobind Singh ordered him to go to Punjab to eliminate the tyranny of cruel *Mughal* regime.

2.0 Military Organization

Banda Singh moved to Punjab after taking the guidance and blessings of Guru Govind Singh. He travelled through Khan Desh, Mandsaur, Ajmer, Phulera, Churu, Bharatpur and reached *Bangar Desh*. During those days *dacoity* was common in the villages. Banda Singh took action against the dacoits very bravely and defeated them. He also got booty (loot ka maal) left by the Dacoits. Fight against *Dacoits* not only increased his financial strength but gave him tremendous publicity among the common people also.¹ Banda Singh issued *Hukamnamas* (letters) to the Sikhs of Punjab on the behalf of Guru Gobind Singh during his stay near the villages of Khaanda and Sehri (Both villages were Jat dominated) in Kharkhauda (Sonapat). When People got the message, they started to join Banda Singh in groups with traditional weapons such as sticks, spears, halberds and swords etc. (Laathian, Barchhe, Gandase, Talwaren). First of all, Sikhs of Malwa reached to him. The number of soldiers of Malwa was more than Majha and Doaba. Peasantry class also joined Banda Singh's army to take revenge of atrocities made by *Mughal* rulers. Gokul Chand Narang² writes that professional robbers and *Dacoits* had also entered in Banda Singh's army due to love of booty and plunder. Besides, local masses also cooperated and helped Banda Singh very secretly because he had become very popular among them. They provided food and shelter for assembled people there. Banda Singh was succeeded to form a large army under his leadership due to *Hukamnamas* of Guru Gobind Singh,

his own leadership quality and good deeds. According to Khafi Khan, there were 4000 horse riders and 7800 infantry in Banda Singh's army.³ Banda Singh created a spirit among the people to fight against the atrocities of *Mughals*.

3.0 Conquests of Banda Singh

3.1 Attack on Sonapat

Banda Singh Bahadur left Saheri Khanda to attack on Sonapat. The *Faujdar* of Sonapat could not face the might of Banda's army and ran to Delhi. It was the first victory of Sikhs against the *Mughals*. After taking bestowment (*nazrana*), he moved further.⁴

3.2 Capture of Royal Treasury

Banda Singh received a report that imperial treasure was being taken from Kaithal to Delhi. He had attacked the soldiers carrying the treasure near Bhuna village and captured the royal treasury. When the chief of Kaithal had got information about this incident, he led his forces and attacked the Sikhs. The Sikhs used the strategy of *Guerrilla* warfare and captured him. Though Banda Singh had forgiven him but took away all horses, arms and ammunition from him. He distributed all these among his army. Like Sonapat, he also handed over Kaithal to the local Panchayat.⁵

3.3 Victory of Samana

Samana was an ancient and wealthy town at that time with a big fort. Samana had a notorious image in the Sikh history and among Sikh psyche. This city belonged to Sayyad Jalal-ud-Din, Shashal Begh and Bashal Begh. These three were *Jallads* (executioners), who had executed the 9th Sikh Guru, Shri Teg Bahadur and two Sahibzadas (Jorawar Singh and Fateh Singh) of Guru Gobind Singh respectively. That is why this town was known as a city of the *Jallads*.⁶

Banda Singh attacked 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. The family of Jallal-ud-Din and other leaders were killed. Both *Jallads* Shashal Begh and Bashal Begh were also sentenced to death by Banda Singh. Only the Hindus were escaped. No young member of the *Mughal* and *Sayyad* families were found alive in the town till evening. It is important to mention here that the tenets (landless people) of surrounding areas helped the Sikhs in this war due to atrocities made by the *Mughal* landlords. Besides, Hindus also joined the Sikhs to attack on *Umraa* due to their atrocities. According to Ganda Singh, the number of people put to death had been estimated at 10000. The Sikhs had captured a very large number of weapons, horses, gold, silver and diamonds from that plunder. It increased the strength of Banda Singh's army. Bhai Fateh Singh was appointed as *Faujdar* of Samana. *Khalsa Panchayat* was also formed to manage the affairs of town.⁷

Banda Singh's target was Sirhind but he wanted to capture all the forts around it so that it can be isolated and deprived from any possibility of help from outside. That is why he turned to east of Samana and captured Ghuram, Sanaur, Thaska, Thanesar, Shahbad and Mustafabad.

3.4 Attack on Kapuri and 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. 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 and got burnt in fire.⁸ Banda Singh's next expedition was against Sadhaura which was a powerful stronghold of *Mughals*. It became a major centre of atrocities against the Hindus. 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 Hindus of this town had been living like slaves. He had also killed Pir Budhu Shah due to his friendly relations with Guru Gobind Singh. Usman Khan had a powerful army and several cannons. The relatives of Pir Budhu Shah extended their support to Banda Singh at this juncture. Peasantry class who was suffering from tyranny of *Mughals*

also joined the Sikh army. As a result Sikhs had also become a big force. 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. Sikh army got lakhs of rupees, a lot of gold and diamonds from Sadhaura. They also captured horses and arms especially cannons. This made the Sikh army more powerful.⁹

After capturing the Sadhaura, Banda Singh also occupied the Mukhlisgarh fort on 16th November 1709. When local Hindus of Chhat and Banur reached to Banda Singh and told him about the atrocities of Muslims against the Hindu community, he took action immediately and captured the Chhat and Banur.

3.5 Battle of Sirhind

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*. He was succeeded to assemble a large and very powerful army and a big arsenal of weapons. On the other hand, although the number of the Sikh soldiers was more than *Mughals* but they did not good weapons. Banda Singh's army was well organized. Sikhs fought mostly with traditional weapons like swords, spears and arrows. They had only six cannons and few guns. The battle took place in the field of Chappar Chiri on 22th May, 1710. G.S. Deol writes that Banda Singh's army entered in Sarhind on 24th May 1710. The Muslim inhabitants were put to death and the city was plundered. Plunder was continued for three days. Son of Wazir Khan with family members ran away to Delhi. Sucha Nand, who was responsible for instigating Wazir Khan to murder the young children of Guru Gobind Singh was also captured by the Sikhs and put to death with all other members of his family. After the victory, Banda Bahadur had established his own government here. Baj Singh was appointed as the Governor of Sarhind with Ali Singh as his Naib (deputy). Binod Singh and Ram Singh were jointly appointed as Governor of Thanesar. The Khalsa flag was hoisted on the fort of Sarhind. Hindu officials were appointed on other subordinate posts in the place of Muslim officials, who had been appointed by Aurangzeb. There were 28 *parganas* of Sarhind with an annual income of 52 lakhs of rupees which had come under the control the Sikhs.¹⁰

3.6 Establishment of Capital

Banda Singh proceeded towards Raikot and after taking a *nazrana* of Rs.5000 from the ruler of that place he returned to Sarhind. He decided to establish the capital of Sikh Kingdom at Mukhlispur and gave it a new name as Lohgarh. The entire treasure of Sarhind, 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 *Sammata*).¹¹ 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.

3.7 Other Victories

Banda Singh attacked Deoband and captured it. Saharanpur which was a rich and big city ruled by Muslims, captured and plundered by the Sikhs. It is important to note here that the Sikhs attacked on all above mentioned places because *Mughals* had made the atrocities upon Hindus of these places. By getting inspired from the victories of Banda Singh, the Sikhs of Majha and Doaba revolted against the *Mughal* regime and established their own hegemony in Jullundur, Hoshiarpur, Amritsar, Batala, Kalanaur and Pathankot. Now, Sikhs decided to attack on Lahore and occupied the area around Shalimar and plundered the mansions of the government officials, the feudal and other affluent people. Three battles were took place between these *jehadis* and the Sikhs at Kotla Begum, Qila Bhagwant Singh and Bhilowal. The Sikhs won all these three battles and captured the forts of Garhi Bhagwant Singh and Bhilowal.¹² Thus, 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).

3.8 Mughal Action against Banda Singh Bahadur

Bahadur Shah decided to take action against the Sikhs. Mughal army attacked on Sikhs led by Binod Singh and Ram Singh at Amingarh on 26th October 1710 and defeated the Sikhs. After this victory, they defeated the Sikhs at Shahabad. Besides, Faujdar Shamas Khan had captured the Sarhind from Sikhs. Mughal forces reorganized

themselves and started killing the Sikhs everywhere. The imperial forces (The forces of Hindu Rajas, under the command of Chhatarsal Bundela and Udit Singh Bundela, too had joined the royal troops) of 60000 attacked on Lohgarh fort under the command of Emperor Bahadur Shah and compelled Banda Singh to leave the fort on 10 December 1710. After leaving the Lohgarh fort Banda Singh moved to the hills of Nahan. Emperor Bahadur Shah died on the night 27-28 February, 1712. His death led to the usual struggle among his sons for accession to the throne of Delhi and Jahandar Shah was succeeded to ascend it. But after ten months, Farukh Siyer ascended the throne of Delhi by putting him to death. 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. Now, Banda Singh Bahadur was compelled to take refuge in the fortress-type mansion of Bhai Duni Chand at Gurdaspur Nangal village due to the continuously attacked by the royal forces.¹⁵

3.9 The Battle of Gurdas Nangal

The combined Mughal forces reached at Gurdaspur Nangal and attacked the Sikh army and besieged the fortress. About eight thousand Sikh soldiers were killed in this battle. 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. 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 via Lahore 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. It is pertinent to mention here that there were 740 Sikh prisoners tied in tows on saddle less camels, more than 2000 severed heads of the Sikhs heaped in carts and thousand of severed heads of Sikhs fixed on spears in the procession. Banda Singh laden with fetters put in a big iron cage placed on an elephant.¹⁴

3.10 Execution of Banda Singh and His Comrades

The execution began on 5 March 1716. G. S. Deol writes that one hundred of them were taken out of their prison everyday 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. Finally, Banda Singh Bahadur, his son Ajay Singh and his leading comrades were taken out of the Fort of Delhi on 9th June 1716. Banda Singh was asked to accept either Islam or death but as a true follower and devotee of Guru Gobind Singh, he preferred to death. Ajay Singh became the youngest martyr of the world history. 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.¹⁵

4.0 Conclusions

Banda Singh Bahadur was a great Sikh warrior and a devoted military commander of the Khalsa who fought against the cruelty and tyranny of the Mughals. His war with the Mughal Empire in northern India was strong and vigorous enough to shake the foundations of this evil empire. He laid the foundation of the Sikh empire in 1710. This resulted in the end of a dark period in the history of India. He had mastered the war tactics of his times. Renowned Sikh historian Ganda Singh writes that in the field of battle, he was one of the bravest and the most daring, sometimes to the extent of recklessness. He was very quick in mental appreciation. His chief tactics was to assess the strength of the enemy first and then fight. He fought a battle only when he was sure of his superior strength and victory. His speed, alertness and immediate dash on the battle field were some of the causes of his success. Although he was crushed by the then combined forces of the Mughal Empire but Mughals were failed to crush his ideology based on equality, justice and brotherhood. That is why an empire was established in Punjab by the Sikhs in the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1801-1839).

5.0 References

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11. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-60.
12. Refer to Footnote 1, pp.100-118.
13. For details see, Deol, *op.cit.*, pp. 92-96.
14. Dilgeer, *op.cit.*, pp.62-65.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-75 and Deol, *op.cit.*, pp. 97-106. The facts and figures regarding the massacre of the Sikhs and martyrdom of Banda Singh Bahadur and his son at Delhi, was 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. For details of this letter see, Deol, *ibid.*, pp.118-119.