
The Origin of Sikh Sovereignty in 18th Century's Punjab

Amit

Research scholar, Dept. Of History MDU, Rohtak

ABSTRACT

In the first decade of eighteenth century the leadership of Punjab was handover to Banda Singh Bahadur by last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. Banda established an organized system during his short span of political career. Sikh scattered after the martyrdom of Banda Singh Bahadur because of anti-Sikh Farmans of the then Governor of Punjab. They established on hills, in dessert and the plain land of northern Indian for some time. With the weakening of Mughal central governance due to the repeated invasions and the rising power of Marathas, Sikhs got an opportunity to gather power and resettlement under the banner of Khalsa. Gurmatta and SarbatKhalsa were made foundations for sovereignty in state. Sikh gathered in form of twelve organized groups, which called Misl. Functioning of these Misl continued for forty years until the end of eighteenth century. Later in the first decade of nineteenth century almost all Sikh groups were emerged in Sukerchakia Misl and formulate a Sikh state under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Keywords: - Tat Khalsa, Farman, Misl, Gurmatta, SarbatKhalsa, Granth, Faujdar, Raja, Guru, Islam, Panth, Baisakhi, Jagir, Nawab, Taruna Dal, Budha Dal, Zamindar, Rakhi, Jagirdar, Tabedari, Misldar.

Contents -

In the beginning of eighteenth century, Lachman Das submitted to Guru Gobind Singh, became his disciple and accepted from him a commission to continue the struggle against Mughal Government. He rose to the position of the commander of Khalsa, now known as Banda Singh, preceded to Punjab to

the Punjab. The conversion of Banda into Sikhism is not conformed, neither by contemporary nor by later historians. Sainapat, a contemporary historian does not say anything about Banda or his conversion to Sikhism. Banda marched towards north with immediate objects to punish Wazir Khan, the Faujdar of Sirhind, who had cruelly murdered the Guru's younger sons and was probably responsible for the murder of the Guru, and to chastise the hill Rajas who had fought for years against Guru.

Banda's career was brief. His first important exploit was capture of Samana in November 1709; he was captured in December 1715 and executed in June 1716. His struggle began in the reign of Bahadur Shah 1st and ended in the reign of Farrukh-Siyyar. He conquered Sarhind, where the younger sons of Guru Gobind had been cruelly murdered by Wazir Khan, invaded the Gangetic Doab, occupied the Jullundur Doab, and, driven by the Mughal forces, took refuge in the hills. He took his last stand at Gurdas Nangal, where he was taken prisoner by the imperial General Abdus Samad Khan. Carried to Delhi, he was executed with horrible tortures, glorying, till the last in having raised us by God to be the scourge of the iniquities and oppressions of the age.

Banda was the first among the Sikh to think of founding a political Raj. The spiritual leadership was vested in the Granth and it came to be known as 'The Guru Granth'. The temporal leadership was assumed by Banda under instructions from Guru Gobind Singh. The political aspects of Banda's struggle is clear from the issue of coins and his administrative measures in the occupied territories. He drove away the Mughal officials and appointed his own men to take charge. But it is hardly correct to say that all

Sikhs were united under Banda Singh Bahadur. The movement became almost entirely a peasant movement because business people and even other rich people who were the fold of Sikhism began to feel that the Sikh movement was taking a dangerous turn and left it either wholly or partially. Banda's success gives a revolutionary effect in the mind of Sikh people, a will was created in the ordinary masses to resist tyranny and die a cause.

After Banda's fall Farrukh-Siyyar directed that every Sikh falling into the hand of his officers should be put to the sword on refusal to embrace Islam. AbdusSamad Khan, as a Persian chronicler says, 'filled that extensive plain with blood as if it had been a dish'. The cruel policy drove many Sikhs to seek shelter in hills and jungles. Only those who had not adopted the outward symbols of Sikhism did not leave their homes. Gradually the policy of extermination was modified and the refugee Sikhs returned to their homeland.

An organizational problem arose: there was neither a Guru nor a leader to guide the community. The spiritual leadership had been vested in the Guru Granth. In pursuance to Gobind Singh's statement that he would be present in any corporation assembly of the Sikhs animated by the spirit of Khalsa, the temporal leadership was vested in the Sikh congregation, which collectively formed the Panth. Thus there were two Gurus; side by side called Guru Granth and Guru Panth; but the essential link between them - the basic unity of leadership - was indicated by a new practice. The Sikh congregation would meet, with holy Granth in their midst and deliberating over questions of common interest would give their decisions in the form of resolutions, called 'Gurmatta'. All Sikhs were expected to receive them as decisions of the Guru and any attempt to contravene them was looked upon as an act of sacrilege. Such meetings of the whole people called 'SarbatKhalsa' were to be held twice a year, on the occasions of Baisakhi and Diwali.

The Gurmatta is symbol and form of supreme authority of the collective will of the people duly formulated. The system of Gurmatta developed during the years of crisis, which followed Banda's death. Apart from Mughal persecution, the community suffered from internal dissensions. The staunch followers of Guru Gobind Singh, who come to be known as the 'Tat Khalsa', had a basic disagreement with those who believed that personal Guruship had not been abolished by him and regarded their own preceptor as Guru. There were two prominent groups belonging to the later category. Many groups emerged, the community was weakened by the emergence of these groups, but gradually the Tat Khalsa gained the upper hand and the resistance to the Mughal government continued.

Zakariya Khan, who succeeded his father AbdusSamad Khan as Governor of Lahore in 1726, made an attempt to conciliate Sikhs. He offered them Jagirs and title of Nawab. After several refusals these were accepted by Kapur Singh Fyzillapuria with the consent of the Khalsa, which seems to have been expressed through a Gurmatta in 1733. Henceforth he was known as NawabKapur Singh and recognized as leader of the community. Sikhs formed the Dal Khalsa, with two sections: Budha Dal (army of elders), led by NawabKapur Singh; the Taruna Dal (army of young), which was split up into five groups under different leaders. The two sections kept together by the supervision of NawabKapur Singh, who enjoyed general respect both as secular and spiritual leader. The operations of the Taruna Dal alarmed the Mughal government and the Jagir was confiscated in 1735. Persecution was renewed. The temple of Amritsar was taken into possession. Bhai Mani Singh, a scholar of Guru Gobind Singh's time, suffered martyrdom. Once again many Sikhs left their homes and sought shelter in Siwalik Hills, Lakh Jangal and the desert of Rajasthan.

Political changes in Lahore and the first invasion of Ahmad Shah Abdali placed the

officers of Punjab in the hand of Mir Mannu in April 1748. This situation was favorable to the Sikhs. They occupied Amritsar and on the day of Baisakhi, the aged leader Nawab Kapoor Singh was replaced by Jassa Singh Ahluwalia as a supreme commander of Dal Khalsa. Sikhs built a mud fort near Ramsar and called it Ram Rauni after the name of Guru Ram Das. It was intended to serve as a base of military operations and to protect the shrine. Several Jathas- the forerunner of the Misls were organized and their leaders began to establish control over different parts of central Punjab.

As a result of Ahmad Shah Abdali's third invasion (1751-52), Punjab was practically loose to Mughal Empire; it became a part of Afghan empire. The Sikh war of independence took a new turn. The Sikhs were henceforth concerned not so much with much the Mughal government as the Abdali and his representatives and allied in India. Mir Mannu's death (November 1753) left the Punjab in a state of lawlessness. This aided to the number of converts to Sikhism and strengthened the Dal Khalsa. Before and during Ahmad Shah Abdali's fourth invasion (1756-57), the Sikhs strengthened their position in different ways. The leading Sardars built forts in their respective domains. Ahmad Shah Abdali left these territories in charge of his son Timur Shah.

A new complication was introduced into the confused political situation by the invasion of the Punjab by Marathas, at the invitation of Adina Beg Khan, the crafty and generally Pro-Sikh Faujdar of Jullundur. The Marathas entered Lahore in April 1758. Marathas were not having essential to run government so they left Punjab in charge of Adina Beg Khan, but Adina died in 1758. Ahmad Shah Abdali re-established his authority in the province and won a great victory on the Marathas in the battle of Panipat in January 1761. After some time Abdali left Punjab. After the departure of Abdali, Sikh entered Lahore and Jassa Singh Ahluwalia was proclaimed king with the title of Sultan-ul-Quam. Abdali's last invasion

took place in 1766-67, and achieved no permanent result; whatever the Sikhs lost during his presence in Punjab they regained as soon as he turned his back. Sikhs utilized in extending and consolidating their power. The territories occupied by Sikhs were divided among small territories called 'Misls', which were twelve and each of them had a chief who owed no allegiance to any of other chiefs. The Sutlaj divided the Misls into two geographical groups.

During the last three decades of eighteenth century the central theme in the history of Sikhs is mutual struggle for ascendancy. The chief of the Misl abandoned the ideal of commonwealth and looked upon themselves as political rivals rather than as fighters for a common cause. During the Misl period the Sikhs worked through one extraordinary institution, the SarbatKhalsa, and extraordinary system, the Gurmatta, which they had given into themselves. The SarbatKhalsa symbolized the union these de facto kings for a common purpose, viz. defence of the common wealth against Afghan aggression and extensive of its boundaries. The last session of SarbatKhalsa in 1805 marked the formal and confederalism. The process of absorption of one Misl by another, which had began earlier, reached its culmination under the Sukarchakia banner.

The extraordinary political system had room for different types of landlords whose position might be described in general terms as feudal. The Zamindars, who had been holding land since the days of Mughals, purchased security by payment of Rakhi. The Jagirdars, who were usually relations and favored companions of the chief, enjoyed grants on condition of rendering personal service and supplying a stipulated number of equipped horses. Failure to fulfill the term rendered to Jagir like to resumption. Tabedari tenure was held by a person who was completely subordinate to the chief; it could be resumed for disobedience. The chief did not interfere in Zamindars and Jagirdars relations with their tenants, but probably the

Tabedari were less free in this respect. Apart from these three classes of landlords, grants in the form of revenue free villages were made to Akalis, the religious and charitable grants were made by way of endowments for Gurdwaras and temples.

In last decades of eighteenth century there was no central government. Any enterprising individual could collect a few followers and began to plunder and siege villages, which were nominally under Afghan rule. Success brought him new followers; in those days of confusion and uncertainty men were prepared to join the hand of Sardar, whom they regarded as competent leader on grounds of valour, experience and wealth. At first the booty was divided in a democratic manner, but Sardars got a large share than the common horsemen. Those Sardars who achieved the greatest success and occupied large tracts became the chiefs of Misls and rose gradually to the monarchical position. Under them arose a class of subordinate chiefs known as Misldar who held lands on condition of military service. They were free to transfer themselves with their possessions from one Misl to another. To a different category belonged Jagirdars to whom allotments of lands were made by the Misl chief out of his own portion. As stated above, the special position of the Misldar virtually converted each Misl into small confederacy. It is not a little surprising that this loose confederal system should serve for about years despite inter Misal struggle, the continuity of Afghan threat and the Maratha intrusion into Cis-Sutlej region.

The military system of Sikhs had two special features. First their army had an overwhelming preponderance of cavalry. Second special feature was tactics with aimed at wearing out the enemy by drawing him into a trap by trick fight and then falling upon him quite suddenly. Horses they use were of fine quality. They have no tents, their cakes of flour serve as dishes as plates. Each horseman has two blankets: one for himself and another for his horse, kept beneath the saddle. These with the grain bag and heel-rope comprise the

baggage of Sikhs. The rapidity of their marching is incredible. This method gave them a high dividend in the long war against Afghans.

The disintegration of the confederal system began as early as seventies. The territorial power of Misl chiefs weakened the spirit of democracy. The SarbatKhalsa degenerated into an assembly of chiefs engaged in an unseemly scramble for territories, and the Gurmatta expressed their will rather than the general will of Khalsa as a whole. Political ambition divided the Misl chiefs into rival groups, each bent upon territorial aggrandizement at the cost of others. Instead of trying to recover the borderland held by Afghans, they became engaged in a scramble for shares in territories, which had already been brought under the banner of commonwealth. The shadow of Ranjit Singh was clouding the Punjab even in the early eighties although the 'self seeking free-booting nobles' did not know.

References: -

- [1] Ganda Singh, Comprehensive History of India, vol.9, p.231.
- [2] I. Banerjee, Evolution of Khalsa, vol.2, pp.145, 152.
- [3] Rose, Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of Punjab and North-West Province, vol.1, p. 698.
- [4] I. Banerjee, op. cit., vil. 2, pp. 147-151.
- [5] S. S. Gandhi, History of Sikh Gurus, p. 465.
- [6] Ganda Singh, The Sikh Review; Khushwant Singh, History of Sikhs, vol.1, p. 90.
- [7] Fauja Singh, Some Aspects of State and Society Under Ranjit Singh, p. 29.
- [8] The Sikh Review, April 1982.
- [9] Ganda Singh, op. cit. p. 249.
- [10] Ibid, p. 247.
- [11] Ibid, p. 249.
- [12] Macauliffe, The Sikh Religion, vol. 5, p. 206.
- [13] Mill, History of India, vol. 2, p. 303.



- [14] Irvine, Later Mughals, vol. 1, pp. 98-99.
- [15] N. K. Sinha, Rise of Sikh Power, p. 2.
- [16] PremSumarg, Teja Singh, Sikhism; Its Ideals and Institutions, p. 32.
- [17] Kapur Singh, Baisakhi of Guru Gobind Singh, p. 328.
- [18] Macauliffe, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 307.
- [19] Dodwell(ed.), The Cambridge History of India, vol. 5, p. 601.