Banda Singh Bahadur

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by

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In 1670, a boy - Lachman Dev was born to a Rajput family in the state of Kashmir. As a child, Lachman Dev loved sports and quickly becoming a skilled wrestler, horseback rider, and hunter. At the age of 15, however, a traumatic hunting experienced changed his love of hunting. In turn, this event also changed the course of his life.

Lachman Dev had shot a doe. When he approached the animal, he discovered that she was pregnant, and he saw her, and her unborn fawns, die before his eyes. This affected him deeply, and he felt great remorse.

In the wake of this event, Lachman decided to pursue a spiritual, meditative lifestyle. He stopped hunting, even became a vegetarian, and began to seek the company of saints and sadhus. For the next several years, he lived as a bairagi sadhu, a wandering hermit who had given up worldly attachments, and spent time with different teachers searching constantly for peace of mind.

Because of the time he spent with these teachers in deep meditation, or bhakti, Lachman began to achieve certain
“magical” powers. He soon became famous for these powers, and, along with his fame, his ego grew and grew. After becoming quite well-known, Lachman Dev, who now was known as Bairagi Madhodas, decided to set up his own dera, or hermitage. At the time, deras were often established by religious or spiritual people. Many deras acted as forces of good and served as home to followers, travelers, or guests. Unfortunately, many deras acted in the opposite way and lured travelers in only to rob or trick travelers of their money.

Madhodas would often invite other Sadhus to his dera to show off his magical powers and embarrass them. For example, as a part of one of his favorite tricks, Madhodas would respectfully ask his guests to sit on a bed. After the guests were seated, he would magically turn over the bed, throwing the guests on the floor.

While Madhodas was tricking his guests at his secluded dera, India was going through a series of changes. After the death of Aurangzeb, Bahadur Shah, India’s new emperor, had invited Guru Gobind Singh to meet with him to honor him and hold peace negotiations. These negotiations lasted for about ten months, ending when Guru Gobind Singh came to the conclusion that more needed to be done to protect the people of India who
were facing persecution and tyranny. He decided to leave for Punjab in late September, 1708. The Guru felt that the emperor would not be able to protect the people on his own, and on his return to Punjab, he decided to pay a short visit to Madhodas’s dera.

On his way to Madhodas’s dera, many warned the Guru that Madhodas would attempt to play tricks on the Guru. And, upon their meeting, Madhodas did, in fact, attempt to cheat the Guru using his favorite tricks. Guru Gobind Singh had arrived at Madhodas’s dera while Madhodas was absent.

Guruji sat and waited on Madhodas’ cot while the Sikhs prepared a meal. Madhodas arrived and was angry that the Guru and his Sikhs had made themselves comfortable without being invited. He tried all his magic powers, tried to turn over the cot that Guruji was sitting on. But he had no luck. Guru Gobind Singh’s mind faith were too strong to succumb to Bairagi Madhodas’s tricks.

When Madho Das had darshan of (met with) the Guru, he was surprised to discover that his magic did not work on the Guru. Upon realizing this, Madhodas fell at the Guru’s feet. While he was running after false, worldly
powers, the Guru had achieved something Madhodas had never been able to achieve - true spiritual greatness. When Guru Gobind Singh asked him who he was, Madhodas responded not with his name by saying “I am a banda, or slave, of the Guru.” He had finally found the peace of mind he had searched for his entire life and decided that he was going to follow the true Guru. Guru Gobind Singh changed Madhodas’s name and initiated him into the Khalsa Panth. By his new name, he became known to the world as Banda Singh Bahadur.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji and Banda Singh Bahadur heard many stories of mistreatment from people across Punjab. But unfortunately, before he was able to continue to address these problems, Guru Ji’s time on this earth had come to an end.

One night, just a few weeks after Guru Ji had met Banda Singh Bahadur, the Guru was killed by an assassin sent by the Governor of Sirhind named Gul Khan. Gul Khan snuck into Guru Gobind Singh Ji’s tent as he slept and stabbed him. Before passing on, Guruji gave three specific orders to Baba Banda Singh Bahadur. First, he made him his lieutenant and asked him to bring those committing atrocities and tyranny in the Punjab to justice. Next, he
appointed five *piaras*, or beloved Sikhs, to work with him and advise him – Bhai Binod Singh, Bhai Kahan Bhai Daya Singh, Bhai Baaz Singh and Bhai Ram Singh. Finally, Guru Ji gave him a squad of 20 Singh, a *nagara* meaning drum, five arrows from his own quiver, and some *hukamnamas* for the sangat of Punjab. After he had delivered these instructions, the Guru left his earthly body and passed away.
2. *The Defender of Faith*

After Guru Ji’s death, Banda Singh Bahadur and his squad of Sikhs decided to follow the Guru’s final instructions immediately and began their fight against injustice in Punjab. As they travelled, they encouraged people to join their forces to help uproot the evil and wrongdoings of some of the rulers at the time. In those days, robbery and other crimes were common in some areas. Many of these crimes were committed by outlaw gangs. Banda Singh had proclaimed that he would come to the aid of any community who was being attacked or mistreated. And, in fact, he did drive dacoits (outlaws) out of many areas. Because of this, his popularity and fame grew rapidly.

Sikhs from across Punjab came to see Banda and many even joined his army. Others came seeking his blessings because they considered him a representative of Guru Gobind Singh.

As Banda Singh Bahadur’s army grew and grew, he noticed several kinds of men joining him. Some were devoted Sikhs who followed the message and orders of
Guru Gobind Singh and Banda Singh. Others were paid soldiers sent by allies of Banda Singh. And finally, unfortunately, some were criminals who joined the army to take advantage of the chaos of battle to loot and murder in the area.

As Banda gained attention and popularity, some of the local rulers in these areas began to set up blockades that stopped Banda Singh and his army from advancing. In those days, not all areas were under the control of one central government. Many small cities and areas had their own rulers or governors called wazirs, kings, and nawabs. Some of these small areas had alliances with each other, with the Emperor in Delhi, with the Governor in Lahore, or even with each other. Battles over land or money occurred regularly and alliances could change quickly.

Each time Banda Singh Bahadur’s army started to encounter blockades at the hands of these rulers, local people were ready to help the Sikhs with food, money, or information that would allow the Sikhs to pass the blockades and continue their progress. Among these helpers were Bhai Kishora Singh and Bhai Pashaura Singh, two merchants that came to Banda’s aid at a very crucial time. In addition, two Sikhs named Ali Singh and Mali
Singh, who worked for the Nawab of Sirhind, disobeyed orders from the Nawab to join Banda. In this way, with help always coming at the exact right time, Baba Banda Singh Bahadur was able to advance through Punjab, taking over cities such as Kapuri, Sonepat, Ropar, Sadhara, Kaithal, and Samana, the town where the executioners of both Guru Teg Bahadur and the Chhote Sahibzadey lived.

In some of these cities, the rulers were very unjust and hateful leaders. For example, in the city of Kapuri, the ruler, Qadam-udin, was very unjust towards non-Muslims. His worst crime was kidnapping non-Muslim women. In another city, Sadhara, the non-Muslims community members complained that their ruler, Osman Khan, was not allowing Hindus to conduct their religious ceremonies or funerals. And finally, in the city of Sirhind, governor Wazir Khan, who had been responsible for the deaths of the two younger sons and mother of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, was still exhibiting tyrannical rule. Banda Singh Bahadur decided he would not let these atrocities continue any longer.

A battle at Sirhind was approaching. Wazir Khan knew that Banda Singh was advancing and was prepared with allies and forces. He was afraid. He knew the Sikhs would
be seeking revenge against him for what he had done to Guru Gobind Singh’s family. As the battle neared, the Sikhs came in great numbers. However, their forces were small when compared with Wazir’s army, which had more people and weapons.

The battle that resulted was a terrible, bloody battle. After two full days of fighting, much of Sirhind was destroyed. There were many casualties, including Wazir Khan himself who was killed in a confrontation with Bhai Baaz Singh and Bhai Fateh Singh.

Because of successful battles such as this, Banda Singh Bahadur began to be known as “The Defender of Faith.” People across Punjab came to him with complaints of injustices. Banda Singh would often respond to these complaints by going to battle with the offending people. It was in this way that Banda Singh conquered the towns of Rai Kot, Ghudani, MalerKotla, and became well-known and respected throughout Punjab.
3. A Sikh Kingdom

After conquering Sirhind, Banda Singh Bahadur established a government in Mukhlispar and started to rule large areas in Punjab, sending Sikhs as his deputies to govern over different areas. The capital of Mukhlispar’s main fort was in severe disrepair, but Banda Singh and his Sikhs worked hard to renovate it so that it was once again usable. They changed the name to Lohgarh (iron fort).

In those days, it was common for rulers to create calendars and coins in their name to establish their authority. However, Banda Singh decided to mint coins in the name of Guru Gobind Singh and Guru Nanak, not himself. On the front, the coins had the inscription:

*Coins struck in the two worlds by the grace of the True Lord Victory to Guru Gobind Singh, king of kings, the sword of Nanak is the granter of desires.*

On the back, these coins read:
Coined in the model city, the refuge of the world, the Ornament of the Future Throne.

With the establishment of a Sikh kingdom, the status of Sikhs was greatly increased throughout the area. Many people converted to Sikhism. There was a general feeling that everyone would experience more fairness and justice under the new rule.

One of the great reforms that brought about justice during this rule was the abolition of the Zamindari system. The Zamindari system was landlord and serf system and was very similar to slavery. Before Banda Singh’s rule, when it came to land, the local rulers would grant a few people ownership of the land. These landlords received the vast majority of the income from the land’s crops, while the laborers, or serfs, who actually worked on and cultivated the land, were left to live off of a small portion of the harvest. Banda Singh and the Sikhs changed this system so that the people who actually worked the land became the owners of the land and received fair compensation for their hard labor.

Throughout their rule, the Sikhs continued to battle against Mughals, Afghans, and other rulers of different territories throughout Punjab. By 1710, just a few short years after Guru Gobind Singh had passed away, Banda
Singh Bahadur and his deputies ruled a large majority of Punjab. His rule extended close to Delhi and Lahore. Unfortunately, this high point was short lived. No regular government was established, and, instead, Banda Singh’s rule acted as a short military occupation, lasting only a year or so. They were often battling other groups for power and control in Punjab. These included Muslim and Mughal leaders as well as Hindu Rajas and Rajputs. It was not a peaceful time.

Banda Singh’s activities and successes had quickly attracted the attention of Emperor Bahadur Shah. Some of the people that Banda Singh had defeated were complaining to the Emperor and he had joined forces with the local Hindu Hill Rajas and some of the Muslim leaders in the area who were already upset by Banda’s power. They took up battles with the Sikhs, starting in September, 1710, and with these battles, the Sikh Kingdom began to fall.
4. *Injustice and Unrest*

Small battles took place in different areas throughout Banda Singh’s territory for some time. Many of the Sikh squadrons were spread throughout Punjab. The Mughal forces started consolidating their power so they could confront the Sikhs.

One of the first battles between the Sikhs and the Imperial Forces of Bahadur Shah took place in October 1710 in Amingarh. Another took place near Sirhind. The Khalsa Army was outnumbered in these battles, and forced to retreat. There were heavy casualties in the Sikh Army and the bodies of the dead were treated very disrespectfully.

The Sikhs started gathering together to consolidate their forces. In December of 1710, many Sikhs, including Banda Singh himself, came to the Lohgarh fort. Lohgarh became the site of great battles. The Sikhs fought very bravely, and for some time it seemed that they might prevail. Eventually Emperor Bahadur Shah’s Imperial
army laid siege to the fort. The Emperor himself was present. He did not want to attack the Sikhs inside their fortress, and instead brought a huge force of 60,000 to aid the siege.

The siege went on for some time, and many Singh died of starvation

On December 11, 1710, the largely outnumbered Sikhs made a last ditch effort to escape. In the dead of night, they sent a volunteer – Gulab Singh Bakhsi in the dress of Banda Singh. The Imperial Forces were distracted by Gulab Singh, thinking they had captured the Sikh Chief.

Meanwhile, the Singh filled a tree with gunpowder and blew it up. In the ensuing panic, many Singh, including the real Banda Singh were able to escape. Gulab Singh and a few other Singh were arrested and eventually executed.

Emperor Bahadur Shah was extremely upset that he had lost his quarry – Banda Singh - and swore that Banda Singh would be captured. The Emperor was able to dig up great treasures that the Sikhs had buried near the fort of Lohgarh. There was much money and gold buried. It was essentially Banda Singh’s treasury. In addition, Bahadur Shah also put a bounty on Banda Singh’s head
and wanted him dead or alive. He continued to pursue Banda Singh for the next few months into the spring of 1711, intimidating the local Mughal chiefs and governors and Hindu Hill Rajas into helping him.

After his escape, Banda Singh spent some time re-grouping and re-organizing. He sent messages to his Sikhs to join him. After some time, he felt ready to begin military expeditions again. The first people he went to battle with were some of the Hill Chiefs in the Shivalik Hills. The first of these was Raja Bhim Chand of Kahlur. He was able to defeat Bhim Chand. For the next year or so, Banda Singh stayed in the Shivalik Hills, sometimes as a guest of the Hill Chiefs, who were now somewhat afraid of him and his military power.

He visited the State of Chamba at some point during this period. The Raja of Chamba and he were on good terms, and he married a girl from the Raja’s family. They eventually had a son named Ajai Singh.

When the Sikhs finally started emerging from the Hills, the Mughal forces also regrouped and started to battle with them once again. Several battles took place during the spring and early summer of 1711. Banda Singh and his troops were constantly on the move, trying to
recapture some of the areas they had once ruled over while the Imperial troops pursued them. Banda Singh and his troops actually won several battles against Mughal forces.

Meanwhile, the Sikhs in the city of Lahore and the surrounding areas were suffering under cruel leaders. This became worse after some of these rulers lost battles and land to Banda Singh. Many Sikhs, and even Hindus suffered under tyrannical, fanatical rulers. Many were murdered and persecuted. None in the royal army was allowed to have a beard, so they would know if there any Sikhs among them.

While these smaller battles waged on, Emperor Bahadur Shah came to Punjab in June of 1711. He was headed for Lahore. However, he became ill in late January, 1712. The illness progressed quickly and affected his body and mind. He died on February 24, 1712. A huge fight for his throne followed. His sons and brothers fought viciously and, in some cases, even killed each other. Eventually Jahandar Shah took the throne, lasting only for 10 months. While Jahandar Shah was in power, Farrukh Siyar defeated him and became Emperor.
This unrest in Delhi lasted from February 1712 to the summer of 1713. The imperial forces had left Punjab to support the various factions fighting for power in Delhi. Banda Bahadur took advantage of the Mughal’s distraction and reestablished rule over some of his earlier territory. There was relative peace and Lohgarh again became a Sikh capital for almost two years and a new fort was built in Sadhaura.

By 1713 Farukh Siyar had reestablished his authority over parts of Punjab. He was a cruel leader and his generals started battling with the Sikhs again, hoping to drive wipe them out for good. Zakriya Khan was appointed the Faujdar (general) over the Jammu area by Farukh Siyar. He was ordered to drive Banda out of Sadhaura. First, they had a long battle and siege at Sadhaura causing the Sikhs to finally evacuate and move to Lohgarh in October, 1713. Eventually they were forced to leave the Lohgarh fort as well retreating into the hills. The Sikhs fought very bravely against much larger numbers, but were eventually forced to retreat.

They spent almost 2 years in the Jammu hills, awaiting an opportunity to reestablish their power and forces. This place became to be known as Dera Baba Banda Singh Sahib. While Banda and his forces were in retreat, Zakriya
Khan and other fanatical Muslims continued their persecution, harassment and murder of Sikhs.

5. The Death of Banda Singh Bahadur

Banda Singh’s forces finally came out of the hills in the early months of 1715. As he was making his way through Punjab, the Imperial forces learned of his appearance. His forces fought bravely, and almost defeated the Emperor’s forces, but eventually he retreated to a place called Gurdas Nangal. The Sikhs established a makeshift fort at Gurdas Nangal by making some modifications to an abandoned building and the surrounding streams.

The Emperor gathered a large force to finally capture and defeat Banda Singh.

The Mughal forces surrounded the enclosure at Gurdas Nangal in the spring of 1715. There were skirmishes and battles for several weeks. The Sikhs were surrounded and cut off from supplies, except for what they could sneak out and get or fight for in small groups.

Over time, the situation in the fort became very terrible. Banda Singh sent Bhai Binod Singh away from the fort, so that some of the forces would survive.
The Sikhs faced illness and starvation. Yet, despite these challenges, they held out for over 8 months. Eventually they were overcome and arrested in December of 1715.

There were 200 Sikhs with Banda Singh and they were taken to Lahore. Zakriya Khan was in charge of the prisoners and decided that 200 Sikhs was too small a number to present to the Emperor at Delhi. He ordered the arrest of Sikhs throughout the countryside. Eventually, 740 Sikhs were marched into Delhi. The captors tried to humiliate them as much as possible, particularly Banda Singh.

Banda Singh and the Sikhs remained calm and peaceful in the face of hardship, torture, humiliation and what they knew would be eventual death. It took over a week to torture and execute the prisoners. They were offered life if they would give up their religion. None of them did. Banda Singh Bahadur’s torture and death were very cruel and horrible. He, along with his son and chiefs, Bhai Baj Singh, Bhai Fateh Singh, Bhai Gulab Singh, Bhai Ali Singh were executed in June of 1715.