

A MAN CALLED BANDA



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Front cover: A silhouette of a statue of Banda Bahadur from a monument to him at Chappar Chiri, Punjab, India

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Rupinder Singh Brar

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PART I

COMES A WARRIOR BRAVE

Chapter 1

The Prophet and the Ascetic

Meticulously maintained weather charts at NASA confirm that on September 14th, 1708, a solar eclipse was witnessed in the northern hemisphere that included almost all parts of India. On that day, many historians believe, an unknown ascetic named Madho Das became a disciple of Guru Gobind Singh and came to be known as Banda. In his book titled ‘Zikar-i-Guruan wa Ibtidai-i-Singhan wa Mazhab-iEshan’ Ahmad Shah, a 19th century historian mentions that encounter and wrote that the following conversation took place between Guru Gobind Singh, and a man who until then, was known as Madho Das.

Madho Das: Who are you?

Guru Gobind Singh: He whom you know.

Madho Das : What do I know ?

Guru Gobind Singh: Think it over.

Madho Das: (after a pause): So you are Guru Gobind Singh?

Guru Gobind Singh: Yes.

Madho Das: What have you come here for?

Guru Gobind Singh: I have come to make you my disciple.

Madho Das: I submit. I am your Banda (slave).

The story of the above meeting is intriguing to say the least because one wonders what was going through Banda's mind that he immediately made a life changing decision. Perhaps they had a more substantive discussion and the above document is only a small sample of that conversation; or maybe after trying many different religious practices Banda had already been thinking of becoming a Sikh. It is obvious from the conversation that Madho Das knew of Guru Gobind Singh even if he did not recognize him instantly.

Regardless of how the meeting came about, it changed everyone and everything around the two. For the small Sikhs community, the meeting set in motion a course of events that transformed them from a band of reluctant warriors to an angry swarm of avenging angels who eventually became the masters of Punjab. For the formidable Mughal empire the meeting was the beginning of the end, one that led to its eclipse and in less than half a century and left it a shadow of its former self. For Punjab and rest of India, the meeting was a starting point of a revolutionary struggle, the likes of which had never before been seen under the Indian sun.

In short, the meeting did not simply change one man; it changed the course of history.

The story of Banda's life is well documented from the time of his above meeting with Guru Gobind Singh onwards, but it is shrouded in mystery until that point. What little is known, is from snippets of oral history, recorded many years after his death and after his exploits had already made him a legend. Most historians agree

that he was born in a well to do family in a warrior caste, the Rajputs, and his family lived at Rajouri, nowadays located in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir. He was born in 1670 and his given name was Lachman Das; after the mythical younger brother of lord Rama, from the much-loved holy Indian epic, the Ramayana. As was expected of the Rajputs, young Lachman learned horse riding, archery and swordsmanship at an early age. Thus, even as a teenager he was already an avid hunter and outdoorsman. One day, when he was out hunting, he chased and shot a pregnant doe with an arrow. When he caught up with his quarry, too late he realized that he had killed not only the dear but its unborn young ones.

That event filled Lachman Das with so much remorse that he decided to not only give up hunting but walk away from his warrior creed altogether. He left home, his family; and joined an order of sadhus (holy men) called the *Vairagis*; meaning those who have renounced the world. Under the guidance of their leader, Janaki Prasad, he changed his name to Madho Das and started living in the company of other such ascetics. They traveled from place to place, begging for sustenance, reading and debating ancient texts, searching for the meaning of life, in anticipation of salvation in the next life. After many years of wandering Madho Das arrived at Nasik, a city in South India, on the banks of river Godavari. The river was considered holy, and often called the Ganga of South India. Many saints, monks, philosophers and ascetics lived on its banks, worshipped, and practiced their daily religious rituals.

Here Madho Das met a tantric teacher named Auger Nath and decided to learn his Nath skills from him. Tantrics were occultists who believed that it was possible to acquire superhuman powers by certain secret practices and many people of the time held them in fear and awe. By all accounts, Madho Das was a charismatic pupil and impressed Auger Nath by his devotion and intelligence. Before Auger Nath passed away, he gave Madho Das his secret texts who then moved to a nearby place, Nanded, and set up his own monastic order there.

It was here, in Nanded, on the idyllic banks of the holy Godavari, that Madho Das had his fateful meeting with Guru Gobind Singh. By then he had been living there for some fifteen years and had acquired quite a reputation as a tantric who could control the elements and perform magical feats. It was said of him that Madho Das was proud of his skills and reputation and sometimes played unsavory tricks on unwary strangers to amuse himself and his followers. Accordingly, Guru Gobind Singh was reportedly forewarned of Madho Das' habits and extraordinary powers. Guru Gobind Singh, being a rational man did not believe in such trickery; he brushed aside the warnings and went fearlessly to seek out and confront the tantric. Apparently, this display of self-confidence, together with the Guru's obviously magnetic personality first unnerved and then impressed Madho Das so much that he pledged his undying loyalty to the tenth master. It was a pledge that Madho Das, now Banda; faithfully observed, till his last breath.

While Madho Das was wandering the Indian landscape seeking salvation, much was going on all around him. Even before he was born, the Mughal throne had

been seized by the puritanical Aurangzeb, who imprisoned his father, the Emperor Shah Jahan and executed his gentle brother, the crown prince Dara Shikoh. Aurangzeb then went on to institute several harsh policies towards his Hindu subjects. Many Hindu places of worship were destroyed, and in many cases, Hindus were forcibly converted to Islam. A discriminatory tax called the Jizya was also imposed upon the ordinary Hindu subjects, sparing only the high born and loyal Hindus besides the Muslims. All these policies were seen by many as an attempt to transform a multicultural India into an Islamic nation.

Such sectarian policies were ill-suited for a diverse and multiethnic society like India, which had been an easy-going place to begin with and was moving towards a syncretic culture, the hallmark of which was tolerance. In North India, the Sikh Gurus together with many Hindu Bhagats and Muslim Sufis had had been preaching the message of tolerance, brotherhood and unity of all mankind for over two centuries. Their teachings had won over many adherents, including many Muslim nobles and even some members of the royal household. For example, the crown prince Dara Shikoh, who governed Punjab, had come under the influence of Guru Arjan Dev's old friend and Sufi saint Mian Mir. Dara wrote a scholarly book in which he echoed the sentiments of Ek Onkaar, when he declared in his book that the entire universe was a manifestation of a single divine entity. Dara's death was thus a rude turning point to the philosophy of unity espoused by the Sikh Gurus.

The sudden change in the political climate under the new emperor thus clashed with the prevailing social and theological ethos of that time and ripples of

discontentment soon surfaced. Minor irritants led to major events and clashes erupted. One of the very first rebellions burst out in Narnaul, a small town near the capital city of Delhi. It was led by a group of worshippers called the Satnamis. The Satnamis were mostly poor and low caste people who had been heavily influenced by the Sikh philosophy and Bhagats and specifically followed the teachings of Bhagat Ravi Das, one of the authors included in the Guru Granth Sahib. The Satnamis openly rejected the imperial authority and killed the revenue officers sent to collect taxes from them. Then they went on a bold rampage with a fierceness that shook the emperor himself. For many months they fought on despite being outnumbered and outgunned. At one point they even threatened the imperial capital. The rebellion was eventually crushed but not before much bloodshed and savagery. Thousands of Satnami men, women and children were massacred by royal orders and their city was left in a smoldering ruin.

A few years later, a group of Hindu Brahmins came to Guru Teg Bahadur and begged him to intercede on their behalf with the emperor against sectarian policies and forced conversions of their community. Guru Teg Bahadur felt duty bound to help and intent on pleading their case peacefully, he left for Delhi. He was arrested en-route however, and brutally put to death. It was in response to such acts and the general climate of rising intolerance on one hand and the socio-political inertia in the caste ridden Hindu society on the other that his son, Guru Gobind Singh decided it was time for drastic action. In a far reaching and a decisive act, he sent for his followers on the Baisakhi day in 1699 and called upon them to give up their

past social identities and re-constitute themselves into a new brotherhood of equals; whom he called the Khalsa.

The Khalsa said the Guru, were to be an order of soldier saints; dedicated to equality and justice for all; and were supposed to be above and beyond all kinds of man-made divisions of race, religion, region, sex, caste and class. It was a revolutionary step, and a direct challenge to the existing inequities of the age. Unsurprisingly, it not only unsettled the imperial authorities but also the ruling upper caste Hindu elite sworn to uphold caste divisions. Guru Gobind Singh and his followers therefore quickly came under attack, first by the Hindu rulers around his home at Anandpur Sahib and when he would not relent, by the forces of the imperial governor, Wazir Khan of Sirhind. The latter was an especially cruel and cunning adversary.

Guru Gobind Singh and his followers were tricked into a truce by Wazir Khan but once they left the safety of their fort, they were attacked. The Guru and the Khalsa were forced to fight in self-defense and in the ensuing battles, Guru Gobind Singh's older two sons fell fighting bravely. His two younger sons, Sahibzada Fateh Singh and Zorawer Singh, aged seven and nine, fell into Wazir Khan's hands and he had them bricked alive. These cruel acts greatly incensed the Khalsa and many ordinary Punjabis but Guru Gobind Singh, stoically bore his losses with dignity and calm. Once out of Wazir Khan's reach, he held his followers in check and resisted calls for revenge. He wrote a historic letter to Aurangzeb called the Zafarnama. It was without a single word of anger, self-pity, revenge or ill will.

Instead, he wrote of one God above all beings and then reminded Aurangzeb of the duties of a ruler towards his subjects. When Aurangzeb received Guru Gobind Singh's letter, he was in Aurangabad, an imperial city, some two hundred miles east of Madho Das' abode at Nanded. By then, he was an old man of eighty-eight and had been camping there for more than a quarter century; fighting a never-ending battle against the Marathas who were fighting him relentlessly, in their own version of a holy war or 'Dharam Yudh.'

Reading the Zafarnama, even the stone-cold heart of the emperor melted briefly, and he requested an audience with Guru Gobind Singh. Being frail however, he was unable to travel, so he asked Guru Gobind Singh to come visit him instead; an offer that the Guru graciously accepted. It was for the above reason that Guru Gobind Singh travelled so far south but as fate would have it, Aurangzeb died before the two could meet.

Aurangzeb was succeeded by his son, Prince Mu'azzam, who became the emperor under the title Bahadur Shah. The new emperor met with Guru Gobind Singh respectfully and even bestowed honors upon him, but as he was still in the midst of a power struggle for the throne, his grasp on power was shaky. Thus, even after several months of meetings with Guru Gobind Singh, Bahadur Shah failed to take any action against Wazir Khan. Realizing that Bahadur Shah was either unwilling or unable to chastise his brutish governor, Guru Gobind Singh parted company with him and decided to travel around the Southern provinces on his own; to meet, greet, teach and preach his philosophy to the people of India.

This is how he came to meet Madho Das at Nanded.

After their initial meeting, Guru Gobind Singh spent several weeks with Banda during which time Banda eagerly listened and learnt from the tenth master. He embraced the Sikh philosophy and the Khalsa tenets without reservation and became a faithful follower. Impressed with Banda's devotion and his obvious leadership qualities, Guru Gobind Singh decided to entrust him with the entire Khalsa brotherhood of Punjab in his absence there. Only a few weeks after accepting Banda as his disciple, he directed Banda to go back to Punjab as his appointed leader. Five prominent Sikh leaders, Bhai Daya Singh, Bhai Binod Singh, Bhai Baj Singh, Bhai Kahan Singh and Bhai Ram Singh, together with twenty other Sikhs were sent with him. He was also given the Guru's own battle drum, the 'Nagara' and five arrows from the Guru's personal quiver as a mark of authority. Finally, a fresh Hukumnama was provided to Banda, directing all the Khalsa to accept his command. Thus armed, the former renouncer and ascetic Madho Das; once again, turned a new chapter in life. He again became a warrior, but now he was also a saint of the Guru. Once again, he set out on a long journey; this time back towards the place of his birth; and to his final destiny.

A few weeks after seeing off Banda, Guru Gobind Singh too was called upon by destiny to his final journey. He was murderously attacked by two Pathan brothers, Jamshed Khan and Wasil Beg, who in all probability had been sent by the wily Wazir Khan, uneasily aware of the close relationship Guru Gobind Singh had

forged with the new emperor. While the assassins themselves were killed in the struggle that followed, their daggers left the Guru fatally injured. Sensing that his end was near, Guru Gobind Singh called all his remaining followers for the final sermon. 'Guru Maneyo Granth' he advised his grief-stricken followers when they begged for guidance after he was gone. And with that, he anointed the sacred Adi Granth as his final and eternal successor. He gently comforted the followers collected around him and reassured them that he would be present among them in spirit whenever five or more of them came together and opened the sacred Granth Sahib for any guidance.

Thus ended, the glorious era of the living Sikh Gurus that had started 239 years ago with Guru Nanak. It was a remarkable epoch in Indian history that saw a gentle flowering of high philosophy, idealistic humanism and brotherly love in the teachings of the Gurus. Unfortunately, it was also marked by intense barbarism as mercurial emperors inflicted much pain and suffering upon the Gurus and their followers. Now ahead lay chaos and mayhem; defiance and rebellion. Above all, ahead lay retribution for the people had had enough.

This next phase in the Sikh saga would be led by and personified by one man among all others, a man who had simply wanted to be known as the Guru's man. History would however remember him not just a man but the ultimate, undaunted man. He would go down in history as Banda Singh Bahadur; 'the brave one'.

Chapter 2

The Road to Chappar Chiri

The news of the passing away of Guru Gobind Singh reached Punjab while Banda Bahadur was still in the vicinity of Delhi. A wave of grief engulfed the region but then soon after, strange letters began circulating in the villages and townships of Majha and Malwa regions of Punjab. They informed the people that the tenth master had not only designated the Granth Sahib as the eternal Sikh Guru, he had also sent a new jathedar to lead the Khalsa in his name. That jathedar was a man named Banda. These letters were signed by several prominent Sikhs who had accompanied Guru Gobind Singh when he left Punjab; men like Bhai Baj Singh and Bhai Binod Singh. People were invited to come join Banda Bahadur in his endeavors.

Soon a trickle of people started arriving to Banda's camp to check out the new leader for themselves. They all went back impressed. Banda blessed them in the name of the Guru and gave away any worldly possessions presented to him. People came with their problems and Banda provided either an instant remedy or promise of one soon. When stories of Banda's generosity reached Punjab the trickle of visitors became a flood. The Mughal administration became cautious but did not know what to make of all the rumors flying around and dismissed talks of a new

Sikh leader as a 'Bahurupia' or an imposter. The civil administration was already corrupt and now was breaking down after years of neglect. Armed robbers roamed around the countryside looting individuals and even whole villages. Banda and his men sensed an opportunity and started out by first helping protect isolated villagers. Soon thereafter, Banda issued a general proclamation that anyone needing protection from 'thieves, robbers, tyrants or subjected to any injustice' should come to his side and he would protect the weak. Other letters arrived in Punjab in Banda's name and started reminding the Khalsa of the cruelty of Wazir Khan towards Guru Gobind Singh and his young sons. They were told that the time for vengeance was coming.

Guru Gobind Singh had created the Khalsa for the purpose of a larger social change and he strongly identified with it. He described the Khalsa in his composition, the 'Khalsa Mahima' as his children; and dearer to him than his own life. In his letter to Aurangzeb, the Zafarnama, he made it clear that despite the murder of his sons by the Mughal governor, the Khalsa still loomed large over the Mughals like a cobra, yet he would not use it as an instrument of personal revenge. Since the inhuman execution of the two younger Sahibzade, the Mughal rule in general and Wazir Khan in particular, had become an object of hatred for the Khalsa. The hard core of the Khalsa was made up of the Punjabi Jat tribes whose frontier culture of the time demanded that it was only just that they made Wazir Khan pay for his dastardly act. Yet Guru Gobind Singh stayed their hand while he lived. From his correspondence with Aurangzeb it is obvious that the Guru wanted proper justice for Wazir Khan; under the law of the land; not mob justice.

Ironically, by sending assassins after Guru Gobind Singh, Wazir unfettered the Khalsa fury and signed his own death warrant.

The effect on the Punjabi countryside of the constant stream of letters coming from Banda's camp was electrifying. In the words of Khushwant Singh, a prominent historian 'it was as if a spark had been set in an inflammable material. Now floodgates of pent up hatred opened up and rebellions broke out'.

Banda himself visited the ruins of Narnaul, the site of the Satnami rebellion and witnessed firsthand, the worst atrocities of Mughal rule. His mind was probably made up by then and he decided on a new retributive offensive course of action against the Mughals; something the Sikhs had never done so far. A Sikh chronicler, Gyani Gian Singh summed up Banda's feelings at the time in the following words:

“To wreak vengeance on Turk has the Guru sent me. I shall kill and ruin the Wajira household; I will plunder and rob Sirhind. I will avenge the murders of the Guru's sons, then destroy the hill chieftains. When all this I have accomplished, then know me as Banda; the Slave of the Guru..”

By November of 1709 Banda was ready to make a move and when he did, he struck with lightning speed. Starting with Sonapat, the city that held the state treasury, he marched within days through lesser towns of Mughal power, brushing aside any resistance. Kaithal fell without firing a shot but Samana fought bitterly

for three days. He marched through both and triumphantly led his army through the heartland of Malwa. The towns of Kunjpura, Ghuram, Thaksa, Shahbad and Mustafabad, all fell without resistance. The Mughals decided to make a bitter stand at the fortified town of Kapuri yet Banda's forces were unstoppable. When the battle was over ten thousand defenders lay dead and the town was razed to the ground by the attackers. Next came Sadhaura, a town hated for being the site of execution of Pir Buddhu Shah, who had helped Guru Gobind Singh in his earlier battles. When Sadhaura fell, it too was followed by much bloodshed.

It now became obvious that while Banda's eventual target was Sirhind, he was strategically taking a circuitous route. It was in part in order to reduce the centers of Mughal power in the province who could be summoned by Wazir Khan for aid but also in part to gain time to combine all his forces for the final battle.

Besides the thousands of ordinary peasants, several prominent Sikhs came to Banda's side. First to come were the merchants, Bhai Peshaura Singh and Kishaura Singh. Then came the brothers, Ali Singh and Mali Singh, who abandoned the service of Wazir Khan to join Banda's rebel army. Even more crucial was a large gathering of the Majha Sikhs who had gathered West of Sutlej but were unable to cross the river because Wazir Khan's allies, the Malerkotla Afghans blocked their path. Banda suddenly appeared behind the Afghans, threatening to block their way back home. The Afghans panicked and quickly scattered. The Majhail forces were safely able to cross the river near Ropar and joined Banda's peasant army.

Once these Majha Sikhs joined him in force, Banda was ready for the final assault. Now everyone, including Wazir Khan knew it; that the hour of retribution had come. The showdown came on May the 12th, 1710 at a small village called Chappar Chiri, ten miles from Sirhind. Wazir Khan had under his command fifteen thousand professional soldiers, battle elephants and artillery. Banda's rag tag army was made up mostly of peasants, social outcasts, some free loaders and a contingent of the Khalsa veterans of previous battles; companions of the tenth master. What they lacked in material and training however, they made up with enthusiasm. In the end, enthusiasm carried the day. In a matter of hours the once invincible Mughal army was routed and shouts of 'Waheguru Ji ki Fateh' rent the air. Many of the notable Mughal nobles of the area, lay dead on the battlefield that day. Among them lay the body of Wazir Khan; cut almost in half by a Sikh warrior, Bhai Fateh Singh. The Khalsa victory was complete.

Two days later they entered Sirhind.

Many other people besides the Khalsa army now joined in; some simply to loot and to rob. Many of them were not even Sikhs and yet hated the heavy hand of Mughal rule. Others were simple robbers and thieves. Some were people who held past grudges and were there to settle scores. And there was much score settling. Officers of the old regime were hunted down and their houses were looted. The line between justice and revenge not only blurred; it became irrelevant at that point and blood lust prevailed.

It was nevertheless a historic moment for never before in the history of India had the peasants revolted so successfully. Now an army of ordinary peasants had not only revolted, it had overpowered a major seat of power of the imperial government. The much-loved contemporary poet, Bulleh Shah summed up the changed situation in the following words:

The tide of the times is in spate.

The Punjab is in a fearsome state.

We all have to share the hell of a fate.”

Chapter 3

Provisions Arms and Victory

Sirhind was not just any town. Besides being a civil and military hub, it was a major trading and manufacturing town in those days, renowned for its many rich businessmen, poets, calligraphers and even surgeons. It was one of the five divisional headquarters or 'sirkars' in the Mughal province of Delhi, and its highest revenue generator. It collected the revenue of all the parganas or district lying between the rivers Sutlej and Jamuna an area more than 100,000 square mile. Its loss sent shock waves throughout the Mughal empire.

On May the 24th 1710, an assembly was held in the main court of Sirhind, the very court where five years earlier Wazir Khan's Qazis had passed the death sentence on the two younger Sahibzadas. All the major Khalsa chiefs were there and a new governance structure was announced. Baj Singh was appointed the new governor of Sirhind and Ali Singh was appointed his deputy. Fateh Singh would govern Samana and Baj Singh's brother Ram Singh, Thanesar. Similarly, other cities would have individual governors. Unlike the old order, which was a one-man dictatorship, the new government would be ruled by a consensus. Finally, there would be no king; the real sovereigns would be the Gurus: Nanak and Gobind Singh, by whose grace the Khalsa victory had come about. After the formal

assembly, instructions were sent out to all the parganas of Sirhind that the old order and old laws were dead and in its place a new order had taken birth.

The Mughal society that the Khalsa were now trying to supplant was a highly stratified one in which caste, class, faith and sex determined not only one's station in life but everything else. For example, Sharia laws governing the empire stated that if you were a Muslim noble from the revered Sayyid clan, you were exempt from all taxes and could not be tried or sent to the prison for ordinary crimes. If you were a governor or a landholder, a position usually held by the Mughals or Rajputs; you could be humiliated by the ruler but not arrested nor physically punished. If you were from the middle class, you could be humiliated and also put into prison but not physically punished. Unfortunately however, if you came from the lowest strata, usually the preserve of low caste Hindu peasants, you could not only be arrested and humiliated but also physically tortured for ordinary crimes. The heaviest burden of these discriminatory laws and policies fell on the weakest members, a segment identified by their class, caste and faith. Mughals and high-born Hindus like the Rajputs were the elites and ruled at the very top. The middle classes were the Khatri below which came the Jats who made up the peasantry. Even below these were the landless poor, mostly Hindus and other untouchables.

It was an inherently unstable system kept in place by only by the injunctions of the Hindu caste system and a judicious use of fear, a threat of punishment; diplomacy and occasional patronage hidden behind an appearance of benevolence of the

emperors. As long as the emperors kept up the benign facade they could get away with an occasional bout of madness and use of violence and cruelty meted out on a whim as did Jahangir when he executed Guru Arjan Dev. But statecraft required that any such acts be balanced with other acts of magnanimity; such as what Jahangir did later on when he pardoned and even showed favors to Guru Hargobind, despite the later's refusal to bow down.

Aurangzeb's forty-nine-year rule changed all that and as a result left the empire exhausted and its people sullen. His constant military campaigns left little time for artful governance and his rigid views upset the delicate social balance and alienated whole groups. Upon coming to the throne one of his first acts was to call and commission five hundred noted Muslim religious scholars to write down a new conservative legal document based solely on the Sharia, the Islamic religious code designed to regulate life in an Islamic nation. Fifteen years later, these scholars handed Aurangzeb a thirty-volume tomb, titled the *Fatwa-e-Alamgiri*. Aurangzeb imposed it eagerly, seemingly oblivious of the fact that his empire was made up on an overwhelmingly non-Muslim population, heightening the already sharp pre-existing fault lines.

Under a new laws passed by emperor Aurangzeb, the non-Muslims' places of worship could be destroyed by a royal command. They were again made to pay a special tax, called the *Jizya* that had previously been abolished by his great grandfather, Akbar. Only Muslims were considered the citizens of the lands of Hindustan, and non-Muslim were merely tolerated. They were even taxed

differently on everything. For example, a non-Muslim trader was taxed at a rate twice that of the Muslims. Similarly, the Hindu and Sikh farmers paid the land tax, the '*Kharaj*' that was twice the rate for Muslims. There were many such discriminatory laws governing their lives, places of worship, and pilgrimages. Not surprisingly, the Mughal rule came to be seen as a tyranny by many ordinary Hindus.

It was in part because of all the above existing and newly emerging tensions within the Mughal society that the Sikh Gurus had to step out of a strictly religious domain into the public one. The ordinary people of North India first started to gravitate towards the Gurus because their teachings prescribed an alternative vision. Unlike the upper caste Hindu-Mughal Indian society around them, the Sikh way of life emphasized an egalitarian society free of social and political distinctions and discrimination. 'Begumpura is the name of the place' Bhagat Ravidas had written, envisioning a place without suffering. 'There are no second or third class citizens there; all are equal here' he went on to write and his words were included by Guru Arjan Dev in the Guru Granth Sahib.

The appeal of that message became especially attractive after the tenth master took an aggressively public stand and put in place a social justice experiment based on the writings of his predecessors. Under the old dispensation, one's station in life was dependent on only one thing; one's identity, which itself was dependent on the lottery of one's birth. There was no hope of social mobility. So, Guru Gobind Singh went on to rectify that by creating an entirely new identity; that of the

Khalsa, and opened its membership to one and all, regardless of their previous status.

By creating the Khalsa, complete with its classy bearings, its injunctions to maintain and ride horses, to carry weapons; all outward trappings of appearance on par with that of nobility, Guru Gobind Singh intended to give his followers both a sense of new kinship as well as an instant sense of dignity and prestige. More importantly, along with dignity came a promise of social justice; for implied within a new identity was also an ultimatum to all; that the Khalsa would take its seat on the social table only at the very top; as an equal with the highest and the mightiest of the land. It was in this context that Guru Gobind Singh's losses at Anandpur and the subsequent ill fate of his children was so lamented in Punjab because watching it, his followers sensed a waning away, in front of their eyes, all of their own hopes and dreams and the promise of a better world. Now Banda had not only brought that hope roaringly alive again, he appeared intent to put the Sikh ideals forcefully and violently to test amidst his bloody revolution. No doubt his appeal was irresistible for so many in 1710.

True to his promise, at one stroke, Banda abolished all previous discriminatory laws and firmans. Now under Banda's new dispensation, not only would the taxes be fair for all, the Jagirdari system, which enabled the nobles to live off the labor of the peasants, itself was abolished and the land was declared a property of the peasants who worked on it. By abolishing Jagirdari system, a whole class of elite lost their dominant status. Moreover, the highest offices of the land was thrown

open to all, regardless of one's caste or creed. A contemporary writer noted that under the Khalsa rule, even a low caste humble shoemaker could leave his village and offer his services to Banda and upon his return would find the highest and noblest of the village waiting upon him, eager to accompany him back to his home in triumph.

While no written code of laws survive from Banda's time, and maybe because the rule was so short lived, none were ever codified, yet one of his surviving Hukumnamas make it clear that he intended to rule according to the Sikh tenets.

"God is one! Victory to his Presence" he declared in one of his Hukumnamas.

"This is the order of Sri Sacha Sahib (The great master) to the entire Khalsa. You are the Khalsa of the great immortal God. Observe the rules of conduct laid down for the Khalsa. We have brought Satyug (the golden age). Love one another. This is my wish. He who lives according to the rules of Khalsa shall be saved by the Guru".

The message was clear; with the Khalsa victory in Sirhind not only was there going to be a new leadership in place, there would be a completely new social order. Everyone would have the right to the fruits of their labor and everyone was not only free but equal; the only true power to be obeyed was to be that of God. As long as one behaved in an ethical manner, with God's grace, social justice would be provided to all.

Unsurprisingly, the constant string of victories and the announcements in their wake captured the imagination of all those who had previously been ignored or exploited by the old regime. The rebellion spread like a wildfire both to the East and the West, with Sirhind as its epicenter. When Banda led his forces east of river Jamuna, the entire Gujjar populace of the area spontaneously rose up in rebellion and declared themselves the followers of Guru Nanak. With their help, Banda took over yet another headquarter of the Delhi Suba; the town of Saharanpur, even as the Mughal officials hastily retreated to Delhi. In the West, the entire Jalandhar 'Doab' (the area between two rivers, Sutlej and Ravi) declared itself the Khalsa domain as both the cities of Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur fell into Khalsa hands. As one historian put it, in the heady days after Chappar Chiri, the entire area between Delhi and Indus became a sea of a resurgent Khalsa with only the cities of Lahore and Kasur still flying the Mughal flags; left standing like two islands within a mighty sea.

Banda was keenly aware that the capture of Sirhind by the Khalsa brotherhood was a major milestone in Indian history. A new calendar was thus issued to mark that event and the year 1710 CE was designated as the year one of the new glorious era. Sirhind had the royal mint from which gold and copper coins were issued by the Mughal emperors in their name to mark their accession to the throne. Now Banda issued new coins, only this time in the names of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh. Similarly, Banda Singh Bahadur introduced a new official seal for his Hukamnamas and Furmans or letters and orders. It bore the following inscription:

Deg-o-Tegh- o-Fateh Nusrat-i-bedirang,

Yaft az Nanak Guru Gobind Singh.

(Provisions arms and victory; blessings unrestrained.

Generosity of Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh).

The Mughal empire, especially its upper classes who had vested interest in the status quo, could not help but fearfully take notice. And so the resistance to the rebellion started to stiffen and men and material started pouring in from all corners of the empire to keep the rebels from fanning out. Absent any heavy artillery, Banda could not march on either Lahore or Delhi; as both were fortified cities. He wisely chose to locate his headquarters to the town of Mukhlisgarh, in the Himalayan foothills which would be easier to defend than Sirhind. He repaired the old fort there and renamed it Lohgarh; the iron fortress; and hoped to wait it out long enough until the Khalsa gains could be consolidated and he could undertake the next round of military offensives.

Unfortunately for him; the new Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah was too astute to not understand that of all the threats facing his regime, this new one emerging in Punjab was a mortal threat not limited to a city or a province but the entire empire and its old way of life. He was therefore willing to pay any price to overcome this threat.

Chapter 4

The Guru Will Protect You

“The Mughals quaff the cup of poison. Those with coarse blankets are up. The genteel watch it all in quiet, They have a humble pie to sup” wrote the contemporary poet, Bulleh Shah of the sudden turn of events in Punjab. Those with coarse blankets of course were the formerly low caste Sikh followers of Banda who were now the masters.

Bahadur Shah was in Ajmer when he heard of the fall of Sirhind to these rag tag army of peasants. Spy reports coming from Punjab elaborated on the nature of the enemy. “The authority of that deluded sect (of the Sikhs rebels) had reached such extremes that many Hindus and Muhammedans have adopted their faith and rituals” went one report. Other reports followed in a similar vein. Bahadur Shah was not a stranger to war and rebellion. Ever since he acceded to the throne, he had battled his brothers, dealt with the Maratha enemy, and more recently, the uprising by the Rajput royal houses of Amber, Jodhpur and Udaipur. However, this latest bit of news seemed far more distressing for all the previous battles were with other nobles and rulers. Rulers, even powerful ones, were always vulnerable for they had personal weaknesses and a limited appeal for ordinary people. Rulers could be bribed, threatened or deposed by instigating rivals. The Mughal empire was built

on exploiting such weaknesses. People's rebellion was another matter, for the needs and grievances of the ordinary people were unpredictable and once united their numbers unlimited.

The emperor knew well enough that dissatisfaction was widespread in the empire and if ordinary people rebelled, it could be catastrophic for the entire ruling class. One of the major checks to widespread rebellion was the deep divisions within the society by caste, class and faith. Thus it was especially worrisome that this army of non-Muslim peasants was attracting Muslims as well. The rebels seemed to be contained for the time being, hemmed as they were between the two large Mughal garrison cities, Delhi in their east and Lahore to their west. Nevertheless, Bahadur Shah could not take any chances and decided to respond vigorously. He hastily made peace with the Rajput rulers, conceding to all their demands and requested in return that they sent forces to suppress the rebellion. Then he sent instructions to nobles and commanders all over north India to proceed post haste to Punjab with all available forces. Finally, he summoned his all four sons, each one an experienced army commander; and informed them that they too would be needed in Punjab. He himself set out as well in the same direction. The rebellion had to be put down at all costs.

In the meantime, Banda too, was trying to win support while he consolidates his gains. Accordingly, he wrote to the Rajput rulers of Amber and Jodhpur, to join him and make a common cause against the Mughals. Although the Rajputs had their differences with the Mughal emperor, these were not religious or ideological,

only limited to patronage and a line of succession. Their differences often arose from disagreement as to which Rajput prince would sit on which throne. Like Bahadur Shah, they had little interest in the affairs of the ordinary people and like him, they too were afraid of Banda's rebellion. A people's uprising, especially one led by the casteless Khalsa brotherhood was an existential threat to them even more than to the Mughals. Since the rebels did not seem to threaten them directly, they decided to play it safe, and not respond to Banda's overtures. Only after it became clear that Banda was isolated, and the Mughals had gained an upper hand that they joined the battle, but -on the Mughal side.

The Mughals and the Rajputs had another good reason to be alarmed by the Punjabi uprising. Even though Punjab was one of the most important provinces of the empire; its breadbasket as well as the sole connection with the frontier provinces of Sind and Afghanistan, yet no Punjabi had ever ruled or governed it from times immemorial. In the previous centuries, it had Greek, Kushans, Rajputs and Afghan rulers and governors. Even after the advent of Islam, when Punjab became a Muslim majority province, the governors were either Pashtun Afghan or Turkic Mughals, and Muslim or not, a Punjabi had never been allowed to govern Punjab.

A part of the reason was that most Punjabi Muslims came from three major ethnic groups; the Jats, the Khatri and other assorted castes, called the Arains. All these were considered inferior castes/classes. Other than their faith, there had nothing in common with the ruling class among the Muslims. On the other hand, there was

little that distinguished any of them from the local Hindus or Sikhs. All of them spoke Punjabi, wore a similar dress and even shared many of the same common rituals and festivals, Lohri, Maghi, Baisakhi etc. No one ever seriously considered them anything other than riff raffs, thus unworthy of a second look. Certainly, the Punjabis were not ruling material by any stretch of imagination in the eyes of the Mughal overlords. But things were changing fast in front of their eyes. Now, seemingly out of nowhere, a son of the soil had not only raised an army out of nowhere, he seemed to be enrolling ordinary Punjabis of all faiths against the Mughal ruling classes.

The battle lines were thus sharply drawn and a civil war, involving not just the royalty and the nobles but large segments of society was taking shape. While Banda had the Punjabi peasantry, especially the Jats, Hindu, Sikh and even many Muslims behind him, the Mughals could rely on all the ruling elite and the upper castes. All the nobles and almost all the upper castes, ethnicities and classes, Muslim as well as Hindu, rallied to Bahadur Shah's call. The Afghans of Kasur and Malerkotla, the Mughal governors of Awadh and Malwa, the Rajputs of Rajputana. Even Chattarsal, the Hindu chieftain of Bundelkhand, who himself had once rebelled against the Mughals, now joined Bahadur Shah. In the battle between royalty and the ordinary people, the ruling classes instinctively closed ranks against a common threat.

Bahadur Shah reached Punjab in October but his forces had already been converging on the Sirhind Sarkar for weeks. Ahead of him the governors of Delhi,

Moradabad, Allahabad and Awadh had already brought their forces. The governors of neighboring Lahore and Jammu too felt safe now and ventured out their fortified cities. With the emperor himself came the four princes, their retinues and the flower of the royal artillery. Even with such a large concentration of men and material, he moved cautiously. It not until November that the emperor's forces felt strong enough to take on Banda directly. Before that, there was little direct action. Now, because the sparse Sikh forces were so widely spread out, they retreated tactically, consolidating their forces and fought back only intermittently, when they could. Thus the towns of Sonapat, Kaithal, Karnal and Panipat were evacuated by the Sikhs and claimed by the imperial forces without a fight. Thanesar and Sirhind saw bloody rearguard battles as the Sikhs continued to retreat towards Lohgarh. Time and superior numbers were on the Mughal side but the Sikhs fought on doggedly when they could. Eventually in early December, a force of some sixty thousand men, backed by artillery came at the base of the hill atop which sat the small fortress of Lohgarh. Yet, having seen the fighting qualities of the rebels, there was no big enthusiasm for a frontal assault among the imperial troops many of whom were also convinced of Banda's magical powers. For example, when disease spread among the massed troops and it rained for several days, it was readily ascribed to Banda's sorcery.

The Sikhs too were in a precarious situation. Surrounded in a small hilltop fortress, their supplies were running out and it was felt that unless a miracle happened, it was the end of the road for the Khalsa and its dreams. The miracle materialized from the courage and the spirit of sacrifice of Banda's Khalsa followers. A handful

of Sikhs led by a recent convert, Gulab Singh Bakshi offered to cause a distraction and hold the fort while their leader and the other comrades escaped. Accordingly, Gulab Singh dressed as Banda held back along with a handful of men while a controlled explosion of a gunpowder filled hollow tree trunk caused enough din and distraction to let the main body of Sikh fighters cut through enemy lines and disappear into the hills. The Mughal forces entered Lohgarh on the morning of December the 11th 1710; only to discover, in the words of one Mughal chronicler that the 'hawk had flown while they found only an owl'. Their disappointment was partly relieved upon finding Banda's sizable treasure buried in the fort compound. The treasure and the prisoners were hastily dispatched to Delhi amidst much rejoicing. A grand durbar was held and honors bestowed by the emperor on his many commanders. It was clearly a victory for the besiegers and they had reasons to rejoice.

The rejoicing was short lived, however. If Bahadur Shah's troops were hoping to see the last of Banda, their hopes were soon shattered. Barely two weeks after Banda made good his escape, it was reported that messages had again started circulating in the Punjabi countryside once again, calling upon Banda's supporters to join him in the hills. 'You are invincible Khalsa of the Waheguru' read one such message. 'The Guru shall protect you. Upon hearing this message, appear without delay in my presence, bearing five weapons'. Far from being beaten, it seemed Banda had regained the initiative and was already getting ready for the next round. The elation of the previous weeks turned to despondency among the Mughal court

and the emperor's mood turned sour. It was obvious to all that the previous jubilation had been premature and much more fighting lay ahead.

Chapter 5

Two and a Half Strikes

Banda had no formal military training before coming to Punjab but what he had was the benefit of observing firsthand, the battle tactics of arguably the best warriors in South Asia at that time. The fifteen years Banda spent on the banks of river Godavari coincided with the rise of the Marathas around him. Under the leadership of their legendary general Shivaji, these lightly armed warriors inflicted defeat upon defeat upon the once invincible Mughal armies. Compared to the heavily armed Mughal armies, complete with battle elephants and heavy artillery, the lightly armed Marathas appeared highly mismatched, even puny, but what they lacked in equipment they made up with speed and strategy. The secret of their success was radically different approach to warfare. Unlike previous armies locked in a mortal duel in a small battlefield, that was over a few hours, the Marathas never stayed in one place for any length of time. Maratha generals would hold on to a hilltop fort long enough to let the lumbering Mughals move their equipment in place, which often took days to weeks and suddenly the Marathas would evacuate the fort and strike elsewhere, sometimes hundreds of miles away. In this way they always kept the Mughals off guard and forced them to fight over a battlefield that stretched over hundreds of miles and the wars that lasted not hours or days but years to decades.

Banda adopted a similar strategy with equally dramatic results. Rather than let the loss of Sadhaura and Lohgarh affect the Khalsa moral, he quickly regrouped in the relative safety of the Himalayan foothills at Kiratpur and almost immediately started sending out messages to his forces far and wide to join him there. Within two weeks of his daring escape from Lohgarh, he felt strong enough to send a '*parwana*' or ultimatum to the Rajput ruler of Kahlur, Ajmer Chand: 'Surrender, or else face the consequences'.

It was an audacious, even foolhardy move; especially for someone who had seemingly been run out of the town by the Mughal army only weeks before but strategically and politically, it was brilliant. No one name was more hated among the Khalsa after Wazir Khan's death than that of Ajmer Chand of Kahlur (then known as Bilaspur) and his father Bhim Chand, for it was this father and son duo who had first attacked Guru Gobind Singh at Anandpur Sahib and failing to dislodge him, had brought Wazir Khan into the fray. Now that Wazir Khan was no more, Ajmer Chand was public enemy number one, as far as the Khalsa veterans were concerned. The ultimatum had the desired effect and the chance to settle scores with an old enemy drew the Khalsa veterans back to Banda's side. Banda did not waste any time, and once his ultimatum was rejected (as he had expected), he struck the hastily assembled Rajput army with a force of a typhoon. Within hours of the attack, the fort of Bilaspur lay open to the Khalsa; and more than 13 hundred defenders lay dead. Unlike Wazir Khan who died fighting, Ajmer Chand and his father surrendered and begged for mercy. Their lives were spared but the treasury and the town were looted to replenish the depleted Khalsa resources.

Not only was the battle of a Bilaspur a much needed morale booster for the Khalsa rank and file; it had the added benefit of serving notice to all other Rajput rulers in the Shivalik hills who had formerly been Mughal allies; -yield or else face the consequences. The Khalsa victory had the desired effect. Realizing that the cumbersome Mughal army was weeks away while Banda's horsemen could strike within days if not hours, the Rajputs yielded en mass, and offered 'nazranas' or offerings due a victor. Sidh Sen of Mandi came to show loyalty and Udai Singh of Chamba offered his daughter in marriage to Banda. The hills of Shivalik became his fiefdom and he could now use them as a back alley to strike Punjab at will. Constantly moving like a ghostly shadow, Banda methodically headed due North West and surfaced again in the plains of Punjab; three hundred miles away; at the Mughal stronghold of Jammu.

The emperor with his huge retinue and heavy guns was still quite far away in the East and the local Mughal forces were caught off guard. It was a page right out of the Maratha guerrilla warrior's textbook.

But now Banda took the tactics further, and inaugurated a deadly battle tactic of his own, that was to become the staple Sikh tactic over the next half century. When the local Mughal faujdar Qutb ud din Kheshgi and his nephew Shams Khan assembled a sizable force to confront Banda, his horsemen came racing towards the Mughal army but after discharging their matchlocks at them, they wheeled around and seemed to turn back and gallop away, seemingly intimidated by the enemy

numbers. Watching them gallop away thus, Shams Khan and many of his less experienced officers and men took this as a sign of cowardice and enthusiastically charged after them. Shortly thereafter, they discovered that they had made a mistake but by then, it was too late. Once the pursuers and the pursued had gone some distance away from the main Mughal body of men; the fleeing Sikhs wheeled their horses around once again and set upon to cut down their surprised pursuers. As soon the last of the pursuers was cut down, the Sikhs again seemed to melt away. Upon hearing the din of battle, and the cries of they dying and injured comrades, the regular troops from main body of the enemy arrived and began to collect the dead and the wounded. It was a perfect trap. The Sikhs, who had never left but had all along been hiding nearby, again burst upon them while many of them were not ready and unhorsed and hacked them all to pieces. It was a perfect rout. Qutb-ud-din and most of his contingent fell in the fighting. It was not a major battle but a spur of the moment engagement, but tactically it was brilliant.

The tactic used that day came to be known as the ‘Dhai phaath’ or two and a half strikes; and was refined over the years to an art form by succeeding Khalsa warriors. In the years to come, the Dhai Phaath became a Khalsa signature battle tactic and went on to claim thousands of unwary victims who were unfortunate enough to fall for the complex ruse.

Meanwhile, its defenders now gone, the Mughal towns of Batala and Kalanaur were now occupied by the Khalsa, so were Aurangabad and Pasur. The fall of Jammu’s garrison was not the worst news to reach Bahadur Shah’s ears; there was

more. Spies reported to him that “The wretched Nanak-worshipper not only has his camp in the town of Kalanaur, more than five thousand Muslims have gathered round and rallied to his cause.” It was further reported to the emperor that ‘Having entered into his friendship, they were free to shout their call and say their prayers in the army of the wretched (Sikhs).’”

Afraid that Banda would soon raise the entire Hindu-Muslim peasantry to his cause and entrench himself firmly in Western Punjab, Bahadur Shah hastily set out for Lahore with his entire army of tens of thousands. He reached there only in August 1711. By then, Banda himself had again disappeared into the hills but his presence was felt everywhere in the province. Many noble families had to leave their homes in the countryside and moved into the safety of the walled city of Lahore. The Sikh contingents were everywhere and would descent into the plains from their hilly hideouts and harass the Mughal columns hunting for them in the countryside. Skirmishes with the Sikh forces occurred regularly and more often than not, the royal troops found themselves battling an elusive enemy, reminiscent of their battles with the Maratha guerrillas.

Banda seemed to have very precise advance information of the royal troop movements. When it was suspected that Banda’s sympathizers and Sikhs had infiltrated the royal forces, Bahadur Shah forced all Hindus under his command, to shave their heads and faces. It was then rumored that the tribe of wandering artisans, the ‘Banjaras’ were providing Information to Banda, so they were banned from the cities; when the Yogi ascetics were similarly suspected, they were thrown

out of Lahore. Hundreds of city-dwelling Sikhs were arrested, some even murdered by the frustrated and skittish Mughal constabulary.

And yet, nothing worked.

Fear of Banda forced the imperial troops to move in large groups, so the traffic on highways bogged down and the trade fell to a trickle. Days turned into weeks and weeks to months and yet Banda remained at large, striking the royal forces, seemingly at will. Bahadur Shah became despondent.

‘Is he caught yet?’

He would eagerly ask any officer arriving in his presence only to frown and turn away when the answer was negative. By late January, the emperor caught an unknown malady and his health deteriorated sharply. On February the 26th, 1712, the emperor fell into a coma and died the following day, defeated and heart broken.

With Bahadur Shah’s death, the era of the great Mughals was over, and though the Mughal empire limped on for a century, it was obvious to all that the great days of the Mughal empire were already behind it. Like his father’s fate before him with the Marathas, Bahadur Shah too had been worn down by a group of shadowy rebels who moved with the wind, seemed never to sleep nor let anyone else rest either.

Aurangzeb had died a sad, broken man. 'Hamza Fasad Baki' (After me, chaos) he had declared presciently from his deathbed. His aging son had tried to stave off his predicted chaos but failed. Now the chaos would begin in earnest as the next several emperors would die violent deaths in a quick succession. And though the empire still had just enough energy left to overcome Banda, the furies Banda set in motion would become unstoppable and the empire itself too would soon fall apart.

Chapter 6

Defeat Defiance and Redemption

Bahadur Shah's death predictably led to an orgy of royal bloodletting as his four sons battled violently for the throne. Banda took advantage of the chaos and again shifted his field of operations back South East and quickly overran and reoccupied Sadhaura and areas in its vicinity.

Bahadur Shah's second son, Jahandar Shah occupied the throne after killing his three brothers. Once the dust of royal succession had settled, the Mughals again found the Sikh rebel chief firmly ensconced in the hilltop fortress of Lohgarh. Despite being an indecisive ruler, Jahandar Shah nevertheless kept up the pressure on the Sikhs but failed to dislodge Banda. The pressure eased a bit towards the end of 1712 as Jahandar Shah's nephew, Farukhsiyar rebelled and the battle for the throne again resumed. Several commanders were recalled to Delhi, but the pressure built up the following year after Farukhsiyar, having won the throne, directed his full energies to put down the Sikh revolt. Overwhelming royal numbers forced the Sikhs to once again evacuate Lohgarh and take to the hills.

It was obvious that Banda had fought the Mughal armies to a stalemate. While the Mughals built up strong defenses in the plains of Punjab with enough forces to

keep Banda from scoring any major victories, Banda had become a master of guerrilla warfare; he hid in the hilly redoubts around Jammu and vicinity and was easily able to stave off any attempts to capture him. Yet as long as Banda lived, the Mughals were denied a victory.

Banda however was weakened in one critical aspect. After making concerted efforts the Mughals had succeeded in sowing doubts about Banda's mission among the Khalsa. For this they used Ajit Singh, the adoptive son of Mata Sundari. Ajit Singh, who was otherwise an insignificant individual, and was later to become estranged from Mata Sundari as well, was pointedly and publicly invited and honored by the emperor Farukhsiyar. Letters purportedly written by Mata Sundari directing Banda to give up his fight on the pain of excommunication, were also circulated in Punjab. As a result of this targeted propaganda, a section of the Khalsa started having second thoughts about continuing the war against the Mughals.

Banda was therefore forced to make a difficult choice. He could either continue to fight and risk splitting the Panth or quit; which meant letting down hundreds of thousands of his followers, many of them among the lowest of the low in Punjab. To these, Banda's rebellion had given a sense of dignity, not to speak of opportunities never before available to them. For them, Banda was the Messiah for whom they were willing to walk to the gates of hell and back.

While Banda was still pondering his options, the decision was thrust upon him. As a result of Banda rebellion, the pre-existing caste class, socio-political hierarchies were badly shaken and the lower caste/classes refused to meekly go back to their docile ways which led to intermittent friction and low level of violence all around Punjab. So when the Afghan chief of Kahnuwan pargana near Gurdaspur sought to suppress the local Sikhs, many of whom were lower castes, their local leader, Jagjit Singh, rose in rebellion against the perceived persecution. An army of peasants, seven thousand strong took the field and soon heavy fighting ensued. The Sikhs came under heavy pressure and predictably looked to Banda for help.

Banda descended from the hills in their support even though Mughal resistance had stiffened considerably. The Mughal governor, Abdus Samad Khan, assembled a formidable force made up of some regular Mughal forces and many others, including the Afghan Pathans, the Meo Rajputs of Punjab, the Bundelas of central Malwa province and other allied groups from all over North India. Banda decided to dig in but the Mughal forces supported by artillery were upon him before the fortifications were complete. Undaunted, he stood his ground and almost prevailed. He seemingly was trouncing a professional army several times strong until superior numbers made his position untenable. Unable to beat the odds, he once again headed for the hills with the royal forces in hot pursuit. Suddenly however, he stopped and turned around to face his pursuers.

Historians are puzzled to this day why he did that. Perhaps he felt he could not abandon the Sikhs in Punjab to their fate while he hid in the safety of the hills.

Perhaps he felt that as long as he had the strength, he had to try to hold off the Mughal army. He initially tried to make his way to the fort of Gurdaspur but finding his way blocked by heavy forces, and hemmed in from all sides, he decided to seek the safety of a lightly fortified 'Haweli' at a place called Gurdas Nangal instead.

A small mud and brick building, in the middle of the plains and within easy reach of artillery, it was hardly a fort and was poorly suited for a prolonged siege. Nevertheless, the Sikhs under Banda's command decided to do the best they could with the available defenses and clung on to it, while the Mughal forces cautiously but methodically encircled the building. Still fearful of Banda's reputation and the desperate courage of the men under his command, they decided not to take the fortress by a frontal assault and decided to wait it out while the Sikh provisions ran out. The Sikhs were caught in a bad situation but still they fought on. With bows, and arrows, a few muskets, and even slings and stones, they tried to keep the Mughals as far away from the fort walls as possible. The Mughals for their part built mud buttresses around the entire structure trying to avoid the missiles and to keep the defenders hemmed in.

When the Mughal armies threatened to bring big artillery pieces close to the walls, the defenders breached a nearby canal and flooded the area. Under intense physical and emotional stress, Banda's judgment and authority faced challengers from his own men. Bhai Binod Singh argued that the Sikhs should cut their way to the hills at night while Banda counseled patience. When the differences could not be

resolved, Banda let Binod Singh and his supporters leave. On one particularly dark night, Binod Singh and several hundred Sikh followers hacked their way out of the siege. Many were killed but some of them got away. Meanwhile, things got even precarious within the fort. When their food ran out they ate carcass meat of dead horses and when even that was gone, they stripped bark from the trees and boiled it as food.

Finally, after a seven month siege, Banda decided to surrender because Abdus Samad sent him a conciliatory message that he would treat Banda and his followers kindly if they surrendered. On December 17th, 1715, seven hundred weak and famished Sikhs laid down their arms. Abdus Sammad demonstrated his kindness by immediately massacring the two hundred wounded Sikhs and putting the rest in chains. Then, perhaps a little peeved that only a handful of Sikhs had kept his tens of thousands at bay for seven months, he sent his forces scrounging around the towns and villages of Punjab, killing innocent Sikhs and loading their heads in cartloads to take them to Delhi in a procession. Banda and his followers were to be transported in chains behind them.

It was customary in the Mughal empire to parade captured rebels around the city to publicly ridicule and humiliate them before executing them. Usually, such displays were meant to highlight the power of the imperial government and made a sorry spectacle of the prisoners and dissuade the future rebels. Banda and his companions too were subjected to such cruel display but contrary to expectations they showed no signs of sorrow or self-pity. If anything, several observers recorded

for posterity the remarkable cheerfulness and dignity that they all displayed as they continued reciting the holy hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib as they went.

Over the next few weeks, Banda's followers were offered a choice between a conditional amnesty if they rejected their faith versus a painful death and yet not a single man accepted the offer and so, one by one they all were executed. Banda himself, and a few chosen commanders, were kept alive for last terrible grand spectacle. They were tortured and hacked to pieces, in a gory execution the details of which are too painful even to contemplate. Yet he kept his composure until the very end, winning the admiration of even his tormentors.

Banda died on June the 19th, 1716; surrounded by a handful of his trusted companions, all of whom had followed him faithfully through his rise and fall. It was less than eight years since the fateful day of the solar eclipse when he had dedicated his life to Guru Gobind Singh and yet it seemed like an eternity. Much water had flowed down the rivers of Punjab and with it, had burnt brightly the flame of rebellion and revolution. Banda had come out of nowhere to strike fear in the hearts of his enemies even as he warmed the hearts of his oppressed followers. Though Banda eventually lost, in less than eight years he transformed Punjab, and nothing would ever be the same again.

If the Mughals had hoped that the details of Banda's gory death would discourage future dissent; the effect was exactly the opposite. As the story and the details of Banda's death reached Punjab, even those among the Khalsa who had abandoned

him due to political and strategic differences could not help but admire his stoic self-control and courage in the face of a painful death. They eagerly embraced him as a martyr and one of their own.

By giving Banda a halo of martyrdom, the Mughals redeemed him with the entire Sikh Panth and practically ensured that his mission and his memory would live on. Thirty-two years later the clock would come full circle as the Khalsa would hunt down the once proud grandson of Abdus Samad Khan like a common criminal and send his head as a trophy to another governor at Lahore. Less than five years later, that governor too would be gone; and the sun would set – forever; on the Mughal rule in Punjab.

Behind it all loomed the legacy of the man who had once contemplated nothing more than a life of an unknown recluse. Even when following his Guru's instructions he had come to Punjab simply calling himself an ordinary Guru Ka Banda. Fate willed it that he would become and die a legend; the man who not only led the Khalsa but taught the ordinary Sikh peasants to fight and decisively beat the Mughals; and to aspire to the slogan 'Raj Karega Khalsa' – The Khalsa shall rule.

No wonder, Punjab would never be the same again.

PART II

UNDERSTANDING BANDA: DESPOTISM, DISCONTENT AND REBELLION

Chapter 7

Life and Death in the Garden of Good and Evil

Eyewitnesses report that just before Banda was publicly tortured to death, a Mughal noble, Muhammed Amin Khan; who later became the prime minister of the empire, was so impressed with Banda's calm acceptance of his fate that he could not resist questioning Banda on the secret of his strength. He looked deeply into Banda's eyes and asked:

“How is it that someone (like you) who shows such acuity in features and so much nobility in conduct, should have been guilty of such horrors?”

In complete composure, Banda is said to have replied:

“I will tell you. Whenever men become so wicked as to relinquish all propriety and indulge in all kinds of excesses, providence never fails to raise a scrounge like me to chastise a race so depraved; yet when the measure of punishment is full, he then raises men like you to bring him to justice.”

With that simple answer, Banda neatly summarized his personal philosophy of war and justice just before he passed away from the world and became embedded in the pages of history and in the process immortalized himself.

Since times immemorial, the idea of a good fight, or ‘Dharamyudh’ had a religious sanction in India. Guru Gobind Singh had written in his composition, the ‘Bachittar Natak’ that the world was a cosmic drama between good and evil, and to defend the good was his ordained mission. That theme reoccurred many times in his other writings yet unlike Banda, Guru Gobind Singh himself fought only in self-defense and never once took the offensive either literally or even in his speech. Consider his often quoted verse from the Zafarnama that seemingly justify military means, (*Chu kar az hameh heelte daar guzasht, halal ast, burdan ba shamsheer dast*).

These are popularly understood to mean that when all else had failed, it is justified to reach for the sword, yet even these verses were preceded by his true sentiments towards violence outlined in the verses that came immediately before: “*Ba lachaarge darmiyan aadam*” meaning, It was out of sheer helplessness that I had to fight for I was left with no other choice to avoid battle.

So then did Banda misunderstand his Guru’s philosophy?

Several historians mistakenly believe that this may indeed be the case. Not surprisingly, several of them, including Sikh historians, have contested the legitimacy of Banda’s rebellion for reasons ranging from frivolous to noteworthy. For example, earlier chroniclers like Kesar Singh Chibber and Rattan Singh Bhangu attributed his downfall to deviation from Guru Gobind Singh’s instructions to remain celibate or due to using slogans such as ‘Fateh Darshan’ instead of the now popular ‘Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh.’ Even a sympathetic 20th century historian, Khushwant Singh conceded that Banda was a polarizing figure who compromised

Guru Gobind Singh's goal of a common Punjabi Identity by making the Khalsa seem anti-Muslim.

The fact however is, that from Banda's last recorded words it is obvious that he not only understood the Guru's ideas about the good fight and Dharmayudh, but also the strict limits placed by the Guru on those engaged in it. In other words, he stood by the righteousness of his ends even as he took responsibility for the mayhem of his means.

In order to better understand Banda and to make sense of his paradoxical actions, one has to first understand the nature of the Mughal Empire in the 18th century and its impact on the Punjabi society, independent of the Mughal atrocities on the Sikh Gurus and their families and followers.

Chapter 8

The Age of the Mughals

Islamic rule had come to India long before the Mughals when the Afghans first conquered Delhi and established an Islamic Sultanate. In the beginning, there was limited participation from the local Hindu elite and the early Afghan Muslim kingdoms or Sultanates existed more or less like a military occupation; resented by the small urban Hindu Rajput elites and ignored by the rest who made up the vast majority of the country. Such Sultanates were always unstable and always in a warlike state, their boundaries expanded or shrunk depending on the military strength as well as the personality of the incumbent ruler.

The Mughals who succeeded the Afghans, changed that, thanks to one man, the third Mughal Emperor, known as Akbar the Great.

Unlike the Afghan kings, Akbar not only befriended the Hindu Rajputs, he and his sons married into ancient Rajput families, and threw open the imperial service and administration to men from all faiths. Under Akbar, his friend and advisor, Abdul Fazl, created a new class of nobles, called the *Mansabdars* who were given numerical ranks, ranging from numbers as few as only ten up to as high as five thousand; the number itself corresponding to the degree of the importance of the title holder and the number of men he was expected to command. Encouraged by

Akbar's conciliatory gestures, many non-Mughals, including the Hindus, eagerly joined this Mansabdari system. Not surprisingly, however, they all came from the Hindu *Kshatriya* upper caste, especially the Rajputs, for the Hindu caste structure did not allow a political or leadership role to any other caste. Nevertheless, over time it led to the desired political stability and a critical deepening of support for the Mughal empire in the upper echelons of the Indian society.

The majority of the society however, which was rural anyway, remained unconcerned and uninvolved. This ordinary Indian society was made up of a maddening array of literally thousands of different ethnicities, tribes, castes and classes but the Hindus outnumbered the Muslims four to one. It was also overwhelmingly rural. It suited the elite and it remained aloof and unconcerned, simply to be available as a source of revenue.

And the society itself was anything but homogenous.

The Hindus among them were divided into some two hundred castes each further subdivided into ten or more sub castes each. Their castes loosely defined the classes; especially so for those at the very top; the Brahmins and Rajputs elite, or those at the very bottom; the untouchables. The latter lived as outcastes. Exploited and humiliated on a daily basis and discriminated against by all, they provided such unappealing services as removing dead animal carcasses or human wastes. Between them and the Brahmin-Rajput elite stood the rest of castes and sub castes, each existing side by side but maintaining strict rules of endogamy with little

interaction outside their own. Thus caste defined one's place of worship, vocation and potential marriage partners. It was an impassable grid, which held each and every person in their specified place from cradle to the burning pyre.

For the Muslims too there was a similar hierarchy, although not as strict. The foreign-born Muslims; Turkic-Mughals, Afghans and Iranians, many of whom were called Ashraf or Syed, were considered superior and provided the ruling elite, while the locals '*Hindustani*' Muslims, who came from formerly low caste Hindu tribes such as the Jats, were called Arain. These lower caste Muslims too made up the peasantry, especially in Punjab.

The country was overwhelmingly rural and the economy agrarian, where the majority of the population was made up of the bottom half of the caste structure and lived in the villages. There were upper caste elite in the villages too but were in a miniscule minority so that the intermediate caste land-owning peasantry, both Hindu and Muslim, dominated the social structure due to their sheer numbers and relative prosperity that came from owning land and property. The castes made up of craftsmen such as the carpenters, the weavers and the artisans came below them on the rural social scale. The unskilled landless laborers, the cobblers and scavengers, many of them from the lowest Hindu castes came dead last. Thus the village society was a self-sufficient and closed structure, that ran itself in a tightly regulated social hierarchies. It was this village unit, that provided the bulk of the income for the empire's elite. Most of these villagers had few rights or expectations but as long as the imperial system did not interfere with them, they were content to pay the revenue and be left alone.

As alluded above, the chief source of imperial income was the land revenue generated from these seemingly small and insignificant villages and hamlets but because there were hundreds and thousands of such villages spread out all over the vast and fertile Indo-Gangetic plain, the revenue was immense and the imperial elite who lived off it, fabulously wealthy. It was for this reason that nobody paid attention to the villages in those times.

For the sake of revenue collection, the villages were divided between the emperor and his nobles into two kinds of units. Those called the *Jagirs* (meaning estates) were allotted to the nobles for their use while those lands called the *Khalisa*, were directly under the imperial revenue collectors. Each *Jagir* or estate was made up of a number of villages. The *Mansabdars* overlords were then allotted these *Jagirs*, by the emperor, but for a fixed number of years. During these times they could collect any amount of revenue for their upkeep. In addition to this, many Rajput *Mansabdars* were also hereditary rulers of the lands from the times before the Mughals arrived, from which they had a separate and unhindered right to collect revenue. The rest of the villages, not included above, were considered the imperial or '*Khalisa*' lands, from where the imperial officers collected revenue on behalf of the emperor. In these lands, most of the peasants were owners of their own lands but were small landowners and engaged in agriculture themselves, and so were called '*Khud Kashts*' (those who tilled their own lands). In those areas, the imperial revenue agent was called the '*Zamindar*' (and often but not always) was

one of the *Khud Kasht* themselves, and was considered their local tribal or clan leader.

Politically, the core of the empire was divided into twenty two provinces called the *Subahs*. Each Subah was made up of several districts, called the Sarkars. The Mughal Emperor would appoint a governor for each Subah called the Subedar and for each Sarkar called the Faujdar. While the provincial officials had complete military and executive powers, most of the time they left the ordinary peasantry well alone because they understood that their primary job was to keep peace and ensure that the revenue kept flowing smoothly into the royal coffers.

Thus under normal circumstances, the ordinary peasants were mostly free to run their lives according to their local traditions and caste and class dictated customs. Nevertheless, it was a very authoritarian and a one sided system lacking any checks or balances. The people had absolutely no power of their own, nor any recognized rights so that all the power lay with the imperial officers. That power was arbitrary yet absolute. The empire lacked any uniformity of codified laws, therefore the potential for the abuse of authority was great.

While there was a large bureaucracy for the purposes of maintaining control and tax collection, there was no legal or social framework in place to address any basic needs, rights or social services to the ordinary citizenry. Nor were there any avenues for social or political advancement for any ordinary individual of ability. One's identity, depending on one's caste and class, defined one's destiny. If you

were a Mughal or a Rajput noble, you tended to consider war and hunting as the only worthwhile activity, you spoke and wrote in Persian or Rekhta, (a forerunner of Urdu) and lived in a large fortified compound. More often than not you had an army of servants, a harem of women and whole host of men hired to fight and die at your command. If on the other hand, you were a lower caste Hindu peasant or artisan, you lived in a mud house in a village, worked at your caste defined vocation, spoke in the local vernacular language, and paid off the upper caste revenue collector on time to avoid punishment. If you were a Sudra, you were dirt poor and lived of your daily labor alone and often starved.

Tax revenues were thus the only real link between these two separate classes; the exploiter and the exploited and this tax, extracted from the rural masses, was the only source of all upper caste/class wealth power and luxury, most of whom otherwise invested in nothing nor indulged in any other gainful activity.

Between the Mughal Mansabdari and the Hindu caste system the bulk of the Indian population, was therefore held in a vice-like grip from which no escape appear to be possible. According to Angus Madison, a historian who methodically studied the world economics from antiquity to the present day, the Mughal political class made up only about 1% of the population but consumed 15% of the imperial GDP. *“India had a ruling class whose extravagant life-style surpassed that of the European aristocracy”* he wrote, but went on to observe that the living standards of ordinary people were lower than those of European peasants and their life expectancy was shorter. This *“high degree of exploitation was possible because of the passivity of village society”* he further observed. The social mechanism that

kept the villages passive was the caste system and its inbuilt checks on any aspirations of social mobility by the lowest castes.

There were no institutional checks and balances in the system, no laws protecting the weak, and the only check to exploitation were the whims and fancies of the self-absorbed Mughal-Rajput nobility. A contemporary Mughal observer, Bhimsen wrote the following about the cruelty meted out to the peasantry by the Jagirdars of the time: *“There is no limit to the oppression of these men. Of their oppression and cruelty what may one write? For no description can suffice.”* Another named Khafi Khan pointed out in a similar vein: *“The cruelty, oppression and injustice of the officials, who have no thought of God, has reached such a degree that if one wishes to describe a hundredth part of it, it will still defy description.”*

And neither was the abuse of power limited to the treatment of the peasants alone. There were no institutional checks on imperial authority and no concept at all of any individual rights within the empire. ‘Rights’ according to the Turko-Mongolic central Asian tribal customs belonged to the strong, those with a capacity to enforce them. Thus even the highest office of the land, that of the emperor, was not inherited as a right; it had to be fought over by each generation; according to the grim custom of ‘*Takht or Takhta*’; a throne for the victor, and coffins for all the rest of the aspiring princes.

Similarly, there were no set laws governing the interpersonal rights and responsibilities of the aristocrats beyond an expectation of unquestioned loyalty to

the emperor. Because of such a lack of any rules or laws (or the imperial will) to check them, the nobles, the petty rulers, the Jagirdars the Mansabdars, as well as the individual tribesmen were constantly jostling amongst themselves, fighting, conniving, aligning and realigning to encroach on their peers for political power and control of land and resources.

This kind of a free for all system necessitated a maintenance and use of private militias by all the rich and powerful individuals and families. As long as these forces were not used against the Imperial State, and the trial of strength remained local, the Mughal Emperor interfered little and such private armies were not only tolerated but encouraged. Thus, carrying weapons, building forts and fortress by the ruling classes were considered rightful and legitimate activity, without which one would expect to be pushed around.

It was a dark Hobbesian world where might and mighty not only defined what was right, they saw no place in it for any public institutions of justice, or for consensus and accommodation. There was no place for public ethics and the concept of social justice was nonexistent. Even as the combined aristocracy, the ranking Mughal officials, the Jagirdars, the petty rulers jostled for power, they at least treated each other worthy of respect. All others, especially the rural peasantry, they treated as a beast of burden; to be fed and protected, especially from encroachment by the rivals but burdened as much as they could tolerate without reaching a breaking point, but to whom they owed nothing in return.

It was against the backdrop of such a one sided socio-political setup that Guru Nanak and his successors were forced into the political space started practicing and preaching their egalitarian way of life.

Chapter 9

The House of Nanak

Guru Nanak vigorously rejected the caste based divisions of the society on one hand and compared the brutish rulers and officials to bloodthirsty tigers and hounds on the other. His message of compassion, humility, fairness, and social justice based on divine laws contrasted sharply with the predatory nature of the Mughal regime and the local elite.

Not surprisingly, the message found eager acceptance among the rural masses, who lacked the power and the social status and yet aspired for some structure, predictability and dignity in their daily lives. Many of these were people from the dominant rural castes, the land owning peasantry who were neither high enough to be counted among the elites yet were not so low either that they lacked aspirations of a better life. Most of these happened to be from the middle of the caste structure, such as the Jat tribes of Punjab, the *Khud Kashts*; owners and cultivators of their own lands; who lived on the fruits of their own labors.

By the time of Guru Gobind Singh and Banda Bahadur, the countryside had experienced close to two centuries of peace and stability that had made the Khud Kasht castes quietly prosperous despite the taxes. Together with prosperity and self-reliance came a healthy sense of self-esteem, justice, and independence. They now aspired to something more; a life of dignity.

Yet, the doors for any social progress were closed to them within the existing social structure. Guru Nanak's teachings provided to this rural peasantry an alternative vision of society. Moreover, the Gurus not only provided the vision and philosophy but also the organizational skill and leadership so that the people flocked to their fold for both spiritual and social reasons. Thus, even before the declaration of the Khalsa the Sikh community had evolved into an informal brotherhood that provided a new sense of community, empowerment and self-respect to its followers.

The self-respect and a sense of purpose was something that the politically marginalized but otherwise self-sufficient '*Khud Kasht*' Jat tribes craved most and not surprisingly it was they who embraced Guru Nanak's teachings wholeheartedly, early on and these tribes and became the bulk of the early Khalsa recruits.

Nor was it simply a question of social status and self-respect within the caste structure alone.

The land owning peasant castes may have been dominant within their own villages yet none of it meant much under the rules of the Mughal empire, where political recognition and basic rights still eluded them for these were open to only those Mughal subjects who were powerful enough to project their power by the use of armed militias. One's liberty, one's livelihood, even the quality and the degree of justice available to one was dependent on the status one enjoyed within the Mughal world because the rules of civil and criminal penalties were different for different castes and classes.

For example, Sharia laws exempted all upper-class Muslims, especially the Syeds, from prison under any circumstances by virtue of their association with prophet Mohammad's tribe. The same law also forbade the Mughal officials from publicly humiliating a Syed. Compared to that, all others were fair game. Not only the ordinary peasants but even their revered socio-religious institutions meant nothing when it came to dealing with the imperial wrath and whims. The Sikh community became painfully aware of this fact in 1606 when the Emperor Jahangir singled out Guru Arjun Dev for execution while pardoning several others, especially revered Muslims complicit in the same 'crime'.

Guru Arjan was not an ordinary citizen.

Not only was he a renowned writer, scholar and a philosopher in his own right; he was also the head of the Sikh Guru Gaddi, a hundred-year-old institution revered by the peasantry all over central Punjab. According to notes entered by Jehangir's in his personal diary, Guru Arjun Dev's only 'crime' was to show kindness to Prince Khusrau, Jehangir's rebellious son. What the diary does not mention was that there were several other prominent supporters of Khusrau who were treated very differently. Two of these were powerful nobles, Khusrau's maternal uncle, Raja Man Singh, the head of the Kachwaha Rajput clan and Khusrau's father in law, Abdul Aziz Khoka, a senior Mughal noble. They were both not only pardoned but publicly honored. Another supporter of the rebel prince was Sheikh Nijam Thanesari, a Muslim Sufi peer who not only blessed him but accompanied the prince during his rebellion. Thanesari was pardoned, his only technical punishment was an 'exile' requested by Jahangir who politely asked him to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, all expenses paid out of the royal treasury. Only Guru Arjun was singled out for torture and execution.

The writing on the wall was thus clear.

First, the imperial authority was unlimited. Second, only the elite (preferably those backed by private armies and militias) were worthy of imperial consideration or mercy. Even individuals guilty of supporting rebellion could expect leniency if they were powerful enough in their own right. Everything and everyone else were fair game. Guru Arjun's son and successor, Guru Hargobind therefore, quite appropriately understood that he had a responsibility not only to his community but

also to the whole society. The empire was devoid of any political institutions capable of providing a check on imperial authority and yet the imperial office was as fickle as it was powerful. To him, Guru Nanak's mission was far too important to entrust its safety to such imperial whims.

As the young Guru and his advisors saw it, the empire needed an institution to provide a moral counterbalance and the community needed protection. Therefore the concept of Miri along with Piri was born as he decided to militarize his followers; a step often misunderstood as a 'vulgar play for worldly power' as the historian Toynbee once famously put it.

It was nothing of that sort.

It was not an attempt at forming a state within a state, fomenting any rebellion or creating any instrument of revenge for his father's death. Guru Hargobind simply stepped into the political space in order to create an institution for morality in public life. If the political classes were going to operate in a state of moral vacuum, then that vacuum would have to be filled by the ecclesiastical class. Until now the Gurudom had catered only to the spiritual and social needs of the community and society; now it would cater to their political and public needs as well, but with a difference. The Gurus were not going to compete with the ruling class or be rulers themselves but would be moral arbitrators if an ordinary citizen needed help.

Militarization was thus necessary to ensure both the institutional and communal safety, given the uncertain and unforgiving vagaries of the Mughal Empire but also to be able to get a seat on the table, so to speak, on the behalf of his constituency, the underserved and the invisible ones, but consistent with the Nanakian principles as well as the established rules of the imperial order, without exceeding those goals.

The new formulation was predictably embraced by those with the least power and most to gain, the peasantry, who now flocked in even larger numbers into the Sikh fold. The newly militant Sikh faith indeed served as an ideal tool for many low caste Hindus to leapfrog over both the Hindu caste gridlock and the Mughal Mansabdari class system to assume a political role in the Punjabi society. It certainly worked that way for many prosperous rural peasants and Zamindars whose tribesmen had provided the economic engine for the empire yet due to their lower castes they were cut out from the upper echelons of society until then.

The idea of militarization appealed to the dominant Jat castes for another reason. They enthusiastically embraced it because it synchronized neatly with their own needs and ambitions of the time as upwardly mobile castes within the rural Hindu society, for though the Jats were rising rapidly in prosperity and the population, they lacked the political clout of their Rajputs and the Afghans neighbors who were considered martial tribes. These two were always armed and could easily push the other 'non martial' castes and tribes around with impunity, something that occurred occasionally as the population increased the pressure on the rich Punjabi

farmlands. The imperial authorities had a sort of hands off policy to such intra-tribal jostling. So becoming armed was the next natural step in the evolution of the rural Jats tribes anyway for it was the only tool available to survive while existing and rising up on the Hindu caste social ladder.

Certainly other Hindu peasant castes, such as the Marathas in the Deccan province were coming to power similarly through militarization, independently of any religious-social developments. So too were the Jats around Delhi and Mathura and the Muslim Rohillas of the trans-Yamuna Doab. In other words, the peasants were rising and organizing all around the land and a reckoning seemed to be on the horizon, yet the empire slumbered on, oblivious and self-absorbed.

Militarization and the Sikh brotherhood indeed proved to be a golden key that opened previously closed doors to many peasant castes of Punjab. A case in point is the saga of a Jat named Phul. Phul was a Sidhu Jat from Bhadaur and as an acknowledged elder of his tribe. He was appointed the Chowdhury (an equivalent to the revenue collecting officer) of the empire, under Akbar and so was well known to the local officials. Yet none of it mattered when he fell late in the payment of revenue due him. He was arrested by the Faujdar of Sirhind and died in custody.

His death went unheeded.

The death of one more peasant, leader or not, meant nothing to the imperial authorities and the story might well have ended there, except that it did not because Phul's descendants survived and like so many other Jats in the Malwa region were initiated into the Khalsa brotherhood by Guru Gobind Singh himself. Soon after, the fortunes of their clan and family took a dramatic turn for the better. Thanks to the Khalsa ascendancy the descendants of Phul not only became a part of the new ruling class, in time they founded royal dynasties of their own. Thus, the three ruling houses of the cis-Sutlej princely States of Nabha, Patiala and Jind trace their origins to Phul, a peasant who had died unheeded and unsung, in Mughal custody. The clock came a full circle when Sirhind itself was destroyed by the Khalsa and its territory was absorbed into the principality of the Phulkian ruler of Patiala in 1764.

The story of the ascent of the Phulkan houses from ordinary peasants to royalty was still far in the future; but the strategy of defensive self-empowerment by the Sikh community started paying political dividends within decades of the announcement of the Miri Piri concept. For example, in 1606 Guru Arjun Dev had been executed on a mere suspicion of making a small, politically insignificant gesture to one party in the Mughal civil war of succession. In 1659, another such incident occurred when the rebellious crown prince, Dara Shikoh came to Punjab, hotly pursued by armies of his brother, the emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir. This time, Guru Har Rai not only met and blessed him, according to some historians he also indirectly helped him get away from his pursuers. Yet Aurangzeb decided to deal with the incidence with care and attention to protocol reserved for the nobility.

Rather than directly harming the Guru he diplomatically invited him to come to the court to explain his conduct. Guru Har Rai ignored the implied order and sent his young son, Ram Rai instead, and the emperor apparently was satisfied. No further action was taken. Seemingly the arming of the community had earned the Sikhs a degree of respect and consideration at par with the other nobles and aristocrats of the empire.

All was not well though, and a storm was slowly brewing; thanks in large part to the personality and the convictions of the new Mughal emperor; Aurangzeb Alamgir.

All that is discussed in the following pages.

Chapter 10

The Empire in Crisis

It can be debated whether all of the seeds of the downfall of the Mughal Empire were sown by Aurangzeb alone or not but there is no doubt that the many missteps during his forty-nine-year long reign set the trajectory from which the empire could not recover.

India, or Hindustan as it was then known, was by far the largest of the three great Islamic empires of the time, (the others were Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Iran), but the only one where the ruling Muslims were in a minority. Emperor Akbar understood that difference and wisely set his empire on a uniquely different course compared to the other two that were run according to the Islamic tenets and by the advice of the clergy. Akbar ignored the protests of the Muslim clergy and replaced the prevalent conservative Islamic legal codes with a new syncretic doctrine of his own, called the *Suleh-e-Kul* or Peace of the Universe. A brainchild of his liberal confidant and friend, Abul Fazl, it was an inclusive system that was ideally suited for the multicultural society like India. The Muslim orthodoxy angrily rejected both the concept and its author and even declared Akbar himself a heterodox. Akbar couldn't care less but the orthodoxy persisted. A new Muslim revivalist

movement spearheaded by a firebrand scholar named Sheikh Ahmad al Farauki soon arose in Sirhind and over the years became an influential center of conservative Islamic thought in India.

Sirhindi and his successors advocated against any dilution of Koranic injunctions and actively recruited Mughal nobles to their cause, and over due course created a powerful conservative lobby in the imperial court that acted as a bulwark against any further liberalization or fraternization with the ‘kafirs,’ as Sirhindi liked to call all others, Hindus, Sikhs, even non-Sunni Muslims like the Shias. Yet it is a tribute to Akbar’s sagacity that the system he put in place held on for two more generations even though the efforts to undermine his legacy began almost immediately after his death.

In the uncertain weeks after Akbar’s demise, there were several nobles who favored his liberal grandson, prince Khusrau’s claim to the throne over Akbar’s wayward son, Jehangir for the later was considered too weak and unsuitable. When Jahangir proclaimed himself the emperor, Khusrau rebelled. Sirhindi’s protege, Sheikh Farid Murtaza Khan Bukhari however swung into action and acted decisively. After first extracting a promise from Jahangir of his commitment to the cause of conservative Islam, he rallied his fellow nobles to Jehangir’s cause and led Jehangir’s forces to victory over his rebellious son. The orthodoxy was overjoyed and Sirhindi immediately wrote a congratulatory letter to his protege, Murtaza Khan. He noted with enthusiasm the ‘joyful restoration of the throne to the ‘King of Islam’ now that the ‘denier of Islam’ (emperor Akbar) was dead. Following the

victory, the grateful new emperor turned over Guru Arjun Dev, to Murtaza Khan Bukhari's custody, to be tortured and executed.

Sirhindi, was overjoyed.

'The execution of the Kafir of Goindwal at this time very good achievement, indeed it has become a cause of a great defeat of the accursed Hindus' he wrote. 'With whatever intentions they are killed, and with whatever objective they are destroyed, it is a meritorious act for the Muslims' Sirhindi gleefully went on.

However Jahangir had no intention of upsetting Akbar's carefully balanced applecart for it seemed to be serving the empire well. Once secure on the throne, Jahangir made up with the Hindu Mansabdars, pardoned Guru Hargobind who like his father refused to pay any fine and left his own father's secular principles intact. The cantankerous Sirhindi was again sidelined. Feeling slighted, he made a haughty scene in the imperial court. It became obvious that he had miscalculated badly when Jahangir lazily waved him away and had him imprisoned in the Gwalior fort to teach him a lesson in imperial etiquette. The orthodoxy was thus served a notice, it had its place, but only when needed in the service of the empire, no more, no less. Sirhindi's school, the 'Naqhabadi silsilla' went on nevertheless, winning adherents, bidding their time and creating conservative scholars dedicated to transforming India from '*Daar ul Kufr*' the land of non-believers to *Daar ul Islam*, the land of the pious.

Things changed under Aurangzeb for in him the orthodoxy finally got the ruler they had wished for. Puritanical in nature and eager to win the approval of the orthodoxy after the morally questionable coup against his father, Aurangzeb turned to Sharia, the Koranic laws to find favor with the orthodoxy. Under his command several hundred Islamic scholars labored for fifteen years to come up with an Islamic legal code for India called the *Fatwa-e-Alamgiri*. For the first time in history, a Muslim monarch would try to impose Sharia on a non-Muslim society. Though allegations of mass conversions under Aurangzeb are probably exaggerated and disputed by historians, it is obvious that a strong pro-Islamic bias became a State policy under him. For example, to punish Hindu rebels, their temples were destroyed, their women taken into Muslim harems and their sons were forcibly converted to Islam. No such punishment was legally permissible on the Muslim faithful under Sharia, so they were spared such harsh treatment. Repair of Mosques were paid for by the imperial treasury while *firman*s (royal orders) against the repair of old Hindu temples were issued. Construction of new mosques was encouraged while construction of Hindu temples was forbidden. Even if such *firman*s were carried out only haphazardly as claimed by some later day apologists, the orthodox tone set by the emperor was unmistakable and fractured the fragile interfaith consensus built by Akbar.

By the late 17th century, the Mughal empire briefly overtook the Chinese to become the largest economic power in the world as its share of the GDP rose to more than a quarter of the World's total. Yet despite its apparent size and grandeur, the class, caste, and religious differences were getting even more stark and the

strains were beginning to show. Even more than his divisive religious policy, it was Aurangzeb's obsession for finding a military solution to all problems and his complete lack of understanding of the new social and demographic realities emerging in the empire that led to the downfall. The Mughals had won the empire through war and had expanded its frontiers through war. Aurangzeb himself had seized the throne through war and added the rich Deccan provinces of Bijapur and Golconda through war but now the empire had grown so large and unwieldy that what was needed was peaceful consolidation and consensus building.

Unfortunately, consensus and accommodation was never Aurangzeb's forte. In 1666, Raja Jai Singh persuaded the indomitable Maratha chief, Shivaji Bhonsle to come to the Mughal court in Agra as a potential ally. An Akbar would have accommodated him and a Dara Shukoh would have even befriended him; Aurangzeb simply insulted and imprisoned him. Unfortunately for him, Shivaji escaped to his Deccan hideout and restarted a guerrilla war against the mighty empire. For the remainder of his life, Aurangzeb would not know a moment of peace as the doughty Marathas made the Deccan an intractable ulcer for the empire, bleeding it of wealth and resources. Aurangzeb was to spend the last quarter century of his rule there, caught up in a never ending nightmare of a war, unwinnable and a futile quagmire.

The non-stop Deccan war and campaigning had other unintended consequences elsewhere.

Even before the Maratha wars, a fiscal crisis had been creeping up upon the empire. As expenses rose, the brunt of the burden fell on the only source of income, the taxes on the rural peasantry. A modern-day Mughal historian, Irfan Habib wrote that the first response the peasant to either famine or exploitation was flight. The second, was armed rebellion and the peasants were getting restless. Because wars needed money and men, many new nobles were created to support the war effort in the Deccan. To support those new nobles, old Jagirs were split into many new but smaller ones. These new nobles now had to extract more revenue from a smaller number of peasants in order to meet the cost of providing men and material for the war effort. Unfortunately it was exactly the wrong thing to do and rebellions broke out. In 1669 the Jats around Mathura rebelled led by a local Zamindar Gocula. That was followed by another rebellion, that led by the Satnamis of Narnaul. Even in faraway Bengal, a Zamindar named Shoba Singh led another such rebellion with much destruction and bloodshed.

Similar harsh conditions were shaping in Punjab, where unable to meet the demands of the ever-greedy nobles, hordes of peasants abandoned their lands and fled the Jagirdari lands altogether. Many of them ended up destitute and came under the care of Guru Teg Bahadur, to live off his Langars. Alarmed at these developments, the imperial spies reported the popularity of Guru Teg Bahadur back to the emperor with a warning that there was a potential peasant uprising brewing in Punjab under the leadership of Guru Teg Bahadur even though such a thing was far from Guru Teg Bahadur's thoughts, for it was not his style. Aurangzeb, who was then battling another bloody insurgency in modern day

Afghanistan, and fresh from memories of the Mathura and Satnami revolts, decided not to take any chances. he sent orders to arrest and execute the Sikh Guru even as Guru Teg Bahadur himself was getting ready for his journey to Delhi to plead the case of Kashmiri pundits.

It was a classic case of paranoia bringing about a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like the imprisonment of Shivaji, Guru Teg Bahadur's execution was a political blunder. It brought the empire one more step closer to disaster for with it was destroyed all hope of mollifying the Sikh peasantry of Punjab. In the years following the death of Aurangzeb, the Mughals were caught between two set of rebels who would start hemorrhaging the empire; the Marathas from the South and the Sikhs from the North. Both those groups, who eventually led to the demise of the empire, first became rebels, thanks to the seminal political blunders made by Aurangzeb Alamgir, the 'ruler of the world.'

Chapter 11.

The Khalsa Revolution

Besides the Subas and Sarkars which comprised the territories directly under imperial control, there were also tens of semi-independent vassal kingdoms and principalities within the empire, each run by a hereditary ruler who owed his allegiance to the emperor. In Punjab, the Mughals directly ruled the rich and fertile plains of central Punjab but in the hard to reach Northern Himalayan foothills there were a number of such smallish hereditary kingdoms, several of them ruled by Hindu Rajput dynasties who had been in power for more than a thousand years.

As was the custom elsewhere in parts of the empire run by vassal chiefs, the Mughal emperors exercised only indirect control over these kingdoms. Their rulers were expected to remain loyal to him and pay an annual tribute but were otherwise left pretty much alone beyond that. These petty rulers were free to worship or govern as they pleased; free to raise private armies, build forts, make alliances and wage war among themselves as long as it was not against Mughal authorities. The tribute was nominal and even that went unpaid sometimes unless a strong Mughal

military contingent was close by. These hill States were all ruled by Rajput clans and being Rajputs, they were brought up to believe that warfare and hunting was their only vocation. They lived aloof from their lower castes subjects, even more so than the rest of the ruling elite, they lived a very selfish and a self-absorbed life.

Anandpur, 'the city of joy,' was founded within these Himalayan foothills by Guru Teg Bahadur and thus lay surrounded by these small hill kingdoms and it was here that the young Guru Gobind Singh grew up; after the martyrdom of his father. Although Anandpur was founded as a safe redoubt, far from the prying eyes of the Mughal authorities, in hind sight it was not so for the Sikh Gurus and their followers because there was no difference between the behavior of the elite in these Hindu kingdoms and the rest of the Mughal empire either in the system of governance, or in their worldview. Neither appeared to have any sense of social responsibility, something that was an article of faith for the fledgling Sikh community, nor had they any functioning public social or moral institutions. Morality and social justice was equally remote in both places.

All this was antithetical to the worldview of the young Gobind Rai, raised as he was to a prophethood based on Nanakian values of Dharma and Karma. He had grown up imagining the human world as a cosmic drama, a contest between Dharma and Adharma - good and evil. Even in his early writings he saw his own role as an instrument of the divine; sent to restore not only the spiritual but also the moral balance in the World. In time he became keenly aware of the social

dysfunction within the Hindu society together with the fickle mindedness of the petty Rajput rulers who surrounded him.

He decided to act.

To him, the logical final step for the fulfillment of the Nanakian mission of social justice was not simply to empower the lower castes to seek accommodation within the existing Hindu caste power structure as his predecessors had tried for over the preceding two centuries but to create a whole new structure; for to him, the old structure was flawed beyond repair. He therefore envisioned a new world order, and an entirely new kind of Indian society, based on a universal system of ethics – Dharma, that was powered by an order of saintly men who would be its torch bearers. Operating in the material world, these men could use violence but unlike in the Mughal-Rajput schema, violence was not an instrument of coercion or dominance, it would be used only as a last resort, and only in the defense of Dharma. The sword thus wielded would be a noble tool, not be an ordinary weapon. It would be called Bhagauti; an instrument of the divine plan; worthy of worship.

With that in mind Guru Gobind Singh established two lasting institutions in his lifetime; the fraternal Order of the Khalsa and the eternal Guru-ship of the Adi Granth, that was given a new title, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The first of his chosen tool, the Khalsa; would be a band of spiritual warriors who were not to simply be his followers but cast in an exact image of himself, they would be his ‘Roop Khaas’, special manifestation. In order to become so, they would give up

their previous caste identities, be free of all previous burdens and dogmas of rituals and religion, caste and class. Since the Guru saw in himself a manifestation of the Nanakian spirit, and the Khalsa an extension of himself, he hoped at all times his followers would carry within them the same Nanakian values. They would be '*Niara*' - unique men; a class of men never seen before. In order to guide these kindred spirits, he established the second institution; the eternal Guru-ship of the Granth Sahib. As the compendium of the writings of Guru Nanak and his other predecessors, the eternal Guru would be a complete reference guide for the Khalsa. Based on Guru Nanak's monist philosophy, the Granth Sahib saw the entire universe as a manifestation of the divine. Reading it, the Guru believed, his cadres would learn and practice '*Sarbat da Bhalla*' - Universal Good; and fight the good fight.

It was an ambitious plan; breathtaking in vision and revolutionary in execution. No one in India had ever attempted such a sudden and complete break with the Vedic past before. It was almost certain to elicit a strong reaction. Inevitably, within months of the creation of the Khalsa many upper class Khatris slowly started distancing themselves from the Khalsa order even as the lower castes, especially the Jats embraced it in overwhelming numbers. The lowest castes rejoiced and the highest castes, the Rajputs, led by their rulers of the hill States, launched an all-out war against him. The Mughals, quite predictably, threw their weight behind their allies, the Rajputs. The Guru was forced out of his home, his family killed remorselessly his Khalsa scattered.

Yet, Guru Gobind responded to all those calamities with superhuman calm. He wrote a letter to Aurangzeb explaining why he had to draw a sword. It has been said that upon reading the letter, Aurangzeb felt remorse and sent for Guru Gobind Singh. While the emperor's emotions may be a matter of speculation, there is evidence that indeed Aurangzeb sent a conciliatory message back and also instructed his officials to not only allow Guru Gobind Singh to travel unimpeded to meet him but also provide him the means to do so.

Unfortunately, fate intervened and though Guru Gobind Singh indeed travelled to the Deccan to meet Aurangzeb, the emperor died before the meeting could take place. The Guru too, passed on, soon after, murdered by the agents of a fearful Mughal official. The matter was left unresolved; and a festering sore was inherited by the next generations; Sikh as well as Mughal.

SUMMARY

By the 18th century the Mughal India had become one of the largest empires ever on the face of the planet and governing it was a colossal challenge. In a hundred and fifty years that Akbar the great created the Mughal Rajput alliance, much had changed. The Hindu society however, had ossified into the pitch darkness of caste from which no escape seemed possible and the Mughals had regressed under the influence of orthodoxy and burdens of constant warfare. The popularity of the Khalsa brotherhood among the Punjabi peasantry was part religious piety and part rejection of the status quo. They were growing in numbers and self-esteem and the two hundred years of Sikh ideology had heightened their expectations. Many

others had become similarly affected and all sought accommodation. What was needed therefore was a new, more inclusive national covenant, and perhaps new institutions capable of negotiating new and better conflict management. Above all, what the empire needed was better governance and an attentive emperor, -things Guru Gobind Singh was to emphasize later in his letter to the emperor.

What the empire responded instead was with a sledgehammer force alienating many. Aurangzeb's political blunders sealed the fate of the Mughal Empire and set the stage for a series of civil wars, and the rise of the Khalsa power in Punjab.

Chapter 12

Moral Case for a Just War

Following the battles of Anandpur and Chamkaur, Guru Gobind Singh lost his home, his sons, other close family members and a bulk of his Khalsa supporters who had been with him in Anandpur. Harried by Mughal forces and practically alone, he finally reached Muktsar in January of 1705 where fresh Khalsa reinforcements rallied to his side and together they beat back the pursers in the battle of Kidrana. Though now he had the upper hand and the forces that could avenge Mughal perfidy, he opted not to carry on the war but decided to write a letter to Aurangzeb explaining why he had to draw a sword.

In his letter, the Zafarnama, Guru Gobind Singh not only outlined the unjust actions of his Mughal and Rajput tormentors but also their complete lack of morals. He explained that he had abandoned Anandpur on the assurances made under a solemn oath and in the name of the emperor, by imperial officers that if he simply walked away from his own home, he and his supporters would be unharmed. Yet once he was out in the open, he was attacked, and many of his followers were killed.

“Not a single one who trusted your oath; should have come to harm, nor killed, captured or deceived” he wrote, holding the emperor himself responsible for those deaths.

‘Now it is your burden to act,
and keep your word according to the pact’

he went on. He finished the letter on an ominous note:

‘Do not, in such a heartless manner put innocence to the sword;
or else you will meet a similar fate at the hands of the Lord.

For there is a King above Kings,
the master of the heavens,
the lands, and all Creation’.

Guru Gobind Singh was not a political scientist but a prophet so his sentiments were expressed in the language of the prophets, but within the core of his appeal lay two very critical questions, pondered by political scientists and philosophers since the very beginning of time:

1. What (if any) was the duty of a ruler towards the subjects?
2. When (if ever), did a regime lose its legitimacy so that it became illegal?

Most rulers from antiquity onwards understood intuitively that raw power alone was insufficient to hold their realm together for long so that a combination of skill, diplomacy, and an appeal to the supernatural, often a divine authority, was necessary to maintain stability. In China, for example, ancient Confucian philosophers observed that an emperor ruled with a 'Mandate from Heaven' based on the concept that a just God provided protection and prosperity through the actions of a just ruler. If the ruler was overthrown, it was then assumed that the rule had become illegal, and so the mandate of heaven had been divinely withdrawn and transferred to the next regime. This concept of the Mandate of Heaven was first used in China to legitimize the overthrow of the Shang dynasty by the Zhou in 1069 BCE. Over the centuries it would be used to justify numerous rebellions and overthrow of several emperors and empires.

Western rulers used a somewhat related concept called the 'Divine right to Rule' to legitimize European kings in the intensely pious medieval age. However, in the 17th century as the Age of Enlightenment got under way, new thinkers came to question that entire concept. Thus, men like Hugo Grotius and James Hobbes, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant emerged who started using logic and rational thinking rather than an appeal to divine authority to take a fresh look at these age old ideas.

One of the earliest European thinkers was John Locke, who graduated from Oxford University, England in 1658, around the same time when Aurangzeb was busy deposing his father in Agra. Building on the idea of a social contract proposed by

his countryman, James Hobbs, Locke proposed a theory of Natural Laws and the Social Contract as a basis of political authority according to which the legitimacy of a regime came not from any divine figure but from a 'social contract' between the government and the governed. His reasoning went as follows: in the beginning, all men were created equal and were completely free, with unlimited personal freedoms and unlimited rights. He called it a 'Natural law' and those rights, the 'Natural Rights'. In order to form a society, then, the people gave up some rights and powers to one of them who was accepted as the ruler and made a contract with him according to which they accepted certain duties, such as duty of loyalty and a duty to obey, but in return those people expected a responsible government, one that acted on their behalf and guaranteed certain protections and rights.

The most important of those protections were, the right to life, liberty, happiness and a right to own legally acquired property. As long as the two sides (the ruler and the ruled) honored this contract, specifically called the Social Contract, the citizen had a duty to obey the ruler, and the ruler had the duty to protect each and every individual's rights. Those rights were sacrosanct, and could not be trampled on, by anyone, including even the ruler himself. If either side however breached their side of the contract, the other could withdraw from it. For example, if the sovereign was found not respecting any of the rights of the citizen, the latter could rebel.

In other words, rebellion was theoretically considered legal, under certain conditions.

Locke's ideas became very influential and provided the intellectual justification of the American and the French Revolutions. In 1789, the French took the concept a step further and argued that not only was the breach of a Social Contract' an adequate justification for a rebellion, but that any breach of the social contract made it a duty for the citizens to rebel. Accordingly, they included in the preface to their post-revolutionary constitution the following words:

“When the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is for the people, and for every portion thereof, the most sacred of rights and the most indispensable of duties.”

Enthusiastic supporters of the theory of Social Contract went on to proclaim that because their ideas were scientific and rational, they applied not to any specific time or place but to all the people of the World, all the time and therefore should be obvious to rational, thinking human beings everywhere. It was a fantastic claim, but a partial proof of that claim exists, if one considers the evolution of another philosophy slowly taking place, four thousand miles away from Locke's England, in Punjab, India.

In Europe, social and political theories about the relationship between citizen and the State came out of secular institutions such as the universities and probably could never have come from theology because the Church and the clergy were so closely tied to the vested interests of the ruling elite. In India, such independent, secular universities did not exist. All philosophy was considered the realm of faith but of the two existing faiths, Islam, like the Christian Church in Europe, was

inextricably tied to the ruling elite; and Hinduism, mired in the inequities of the caste system could hardly be expected to provide the moral rationale for social justice in politics. Therefore the task was left to another faith or institution who could think out of the box, so to speak.

That was the faith of Guru Nanak, slowly taking shape and form, in Punjab.

Neither aligned with the Mughal-Rajput political elite nor with the establishment religious ones, the Sikh Guru-ship establishment by Guru Nanak, and built upon his successors was by default the only institution available that could fill the critical void. The Sikh Gurus were not political philosophers but prophets to begin with, and so their focus was decidedly on personal spirituality and personal morals. However, their egalitarian ideology was so radical and the Mughal empire so despotic that lacking any other checks or balances on the rulers, the Sikh Gurus were dragged into a new and unfamiliar role of being political moralists and thinkers as well.

Starting with the same basic idea as Locke that all men are created equal by one Creator, Guru Nanak similarly came to a logical conclusion that the only unchecked authority could be that of the Creator, while everyone else, including the rulers along with the ruled, were simply men, no more, no less, so they all needed to be held accountable. He de-emphasized the legitimacy of the rulers by power alone and emphasized that morals and virtue were the true legitimizers. 'Even if one's greatness was known in nine continents, without virtue of God's

grace, one was no better than a worm or a common criminal’ wrote Guru Nanak in the Japji Sahib. He minced no words and compared rapacious rulers to wild animals. Thus, not only were personal checks and balances central to the Sikh faith, even unrestrained temporal authority was rejected early on, as a matter of principle by the Sikh theology.

Guru Arjun Dev’s martyrdom for the sake of freedom of charity and Guru Teg Bahadur’s for the sake of freedom of worship further highlight the determination of the Sikh Gurus to act as an institutional check to the unbridled State power. Guru Gobind Singh best elaborated the Sikh idea of polity in his writings and a kind of convergence with the Enlightenment thinkers emerged in the early Sikh literature.

What the Western thinkers called the ‘Natural laws’ became the eternal Laws of Dharma -righteousness in his words. Both agreed that the temporal authority had to be answerable to a higher moral law and therefore could not be limitless; even emperors were subjects to restraints. What the Enlightenment thinkers called a right and a duty to rebel was in Guru Gobind Singh’s formulation a call to ‘Dharmyudh’ the righteous struggle.

‘May I never be afraid of performing noble duties, even if I have to fight in the process; because simply the act of speaking up and refusing to be afraid, is certainly a victory’ he wrote.

The tenth Guru though stopped short of calling for a rebellion as a duty, and like Hobbes, advocated the use of force only as a last resort (in self-defense). Banda, however, like the French revolutionaries, was to take the idea of the culpability of rulers, far further. In his final hours, he explained the rationale behind his rebellion as the rulers having ‘become so wicked as to relinquish all propriety and indulge in all kinds of excesses, that providence had to raise a scourge like him to restore balance.’ And then he added, ‘Yet when the measure of punishment is full, he then raises men like you to bring (men like Banda) to justice’ holding himself to a similar, perhaps an even higher moral standard.

Sixty years later and more than half a way around the World, Thomas Jefferson was to provide a similar rationale for the rebellion of the thirteen American colonies when he wrote: *“When a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them (the people) under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such a government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.....”*

Reading those words, Jefferson could well be mistaken for simply paraphrasing Banda for the words were similar and sentiments identical. Today, Locke’s ideas and Jefferson’s words form the bedrock of many liberal democracies around the World. Held to that standard, Banda had a far stronger case for rebellion than the American founding fathers or the French revolutionaries ever did, yet among all of them, he alone seemed to acknowledge his own responsibility and express a degree of contrition. Perhaps because he alone was restrained by the tenets of his adopted

faith, which argued that everyone, including the enemies were a manifestation of the same God. ‘Sabh mein jot, jot hai Soi’ as Guru Nanak had written two centuries before him.

Chapter 13

Assessing a Legend

The savage retaliation against the Guru's family by the Faujdar of Sirhind, Wazir Khan seemingly brought about the desired calm in the short run, but the calm was deceptive. The society was already polarized and resentful. The ferocious State response against the Guru-Gaddi; the one and only functioning social institution left in Punjab that was revered by many only hardened their attitudes. What Wazir Khan and the Mughal allied Afghan and Meo Rajput tribes saw as a victory over a troublesome Guru was seen as a sacrilege by the Jats of central Punjab. They took it as a personal setback because as they saw it, the Guru was their champion who had raised their aspirations like never before and they were not going to give them up so easily. In the years following the battles of Anandpur and Chamkaur, the Khalsa ranks surged as the determined Jats joined the Khalsa order in ever increasing numbers. A civil war like situation started shaping up as many newly minted Khalsa converts felt that though they and their Guru had lost Anandpur, it was only the first round. It was only a matter of time before they would get their chance to test the limits of the Mughal power once again.

To many, that time arrived; with the arrival of Banda in Punjab.

Even though Banda provided the most logical intellectual argument for the insurrection that he led, he was not its instigator. Peasants had been restive in Punjab and elsewhere long before Banda arrived and continued long after his execution. Before him they revolted in Mathura and Narnaul and after him in faraway places like Bengal and Bihar. Even in Punjab, once Banda's sectarian threat abated, the Muslims peasantry of Kasur too rebelled against Mughal authority. The point is, that by the early 18th century the imperial elite were considered oppressive by many people cutting across religious and regional lines and thus were suffering from a massive crisis of confidence. Banda just happened to be the right man at the right time for the Khalsa. To his credit, he provided just the kind of leadership that was needed. He took his time to learn the concerns of the people and then acted only after he was convinced that the Mughals had indeed lost the legitimacy to rule.

Even then he was cautious and methodical to begin with. He announced his arrival in late 1708 and then for months he waited, sending out messages, meeting with delegations, handing out gifts until he was certain that his cause was right and also that he had earned the confidence of the Khalsa. Once he embarked on the military mission though, he struck decisively and hard. His daring leadership and the resulting victory at Chappar Chiri was nothing short of spectacular but it also plunged Punjab into what can be best described as a civil war. Wazir Khan's ruthless targeting of Guru Gobind Singh was rightly seen as an attack on a revered institution as well as on their own ambitions by the Sikh peasantry but the Mughals still had pockets of support, notably among the Muslim Afghans of Malerkotla and

Kasur. They also had no opposition in the Muslim and Khatri dominated urban centers like Lahore and Sirhind. So when Banda declared the establishment of a new regime, it split Punjab along the caste/class and faith lines and resistance was swift. The local Muslims of Lahore declared a Jihad and raised a defensive militia, but they were beaten back. The Emperor himself quickly hurried to Punjab with all available troops and reoccupied Punjab defeating the rebels. By the year end he was even able to eject the Khalsa forces from their 'capital' of Lohgarh.

Yet, it was not enough for it was only the end of the first phase.

From then onwards it was a battle of strategy and wits on one hand and superior forces on the other for the Mughals were relentless. Nevertheless, Banda still managed to give the appearance that it was he who was in charge. Following the loss of Lohgarh, he quickly regrouped and regained the initiative. Within weeks he won a decisive victory over the hill chiefs who were vassals of the Mughals. He continued to move fast and exploited opportunities as they came. When the enemy concentrated forces at one place he would shift the theatre of war elsewhere to keep them off guard. Even on the run, he continued to spread the Sikh message, find new converts and share the spoils of war with the rural dispossessed. It was this kind of leadership that kept the rebellion going. It also won Banda an undying loyalty of his own men and even a grudging respect from his enemies. Till the very end, he could count on the support of the rural masses for food and supplies, and for critical information about troop movements and such from the wandering

outcaste tribes like the Banjaras who discreetly moved from place to place gathering and supplying information.

The devotion of his men and the lower castes population of Punjab to his cause rose to a cult level and Banda reciprocated it, even at great personal risks. For example, in 1714-15 Banda himself was safe in the hills but the plains of Punjab were then crawling with royal troops. Yet when the Sikh leaders around Kalanaur and Batala rebelled against persecution by the vengeful Mughals, he came back to Punjab to help. Once in the plains, he realized there was little chance for him to prevail, so he headed back for the hills but then only a few miles short, he suddenly turned around to face the enemy like a wounded animal. He almost trounced his pursuers, but artillery fire pinned him down. He sought refuge at Gurdas Nangal and refused to leave even when he still had the strength to do so. Many historians consider this decision to be a military blunder. Only a few understand that his motivation was perhaps his empathy and the need to show of support for those Khalsa left behind in the villages, unable to leave, yet at the mercy of the enemy. He kept going for seven long months and surrendered only after his ranks were thinned through hunger, disease, deaths and desertions and further resistance became untenable.

The historian Irvine recounts contemporary eyewitness accounts of Banda's captivity and execution with obvious admiration. He was captured along with seven hundred sick and starving, wretched followers who had been reduced to eating tree leaves and barks for sustenance. They all were put in cages like animals

and paraded around, taunted and tortured for weeks before being executed. Yet they never betrayed their loyalty to Banda, or their faith in their Guru, or their commitment to their mission. Stoically bearing all humiliations they responded to the taunts and jibes with recitation of the Bani or shouts of Waheguru, Waheguru. Witnesses reported an incident of a young man barely out of teens whose mother appealed to the Mughal Emperor and won clemency for him stating that she and her son were Hindus, not Sikhs. The emperor relented but the young man himself angrily denounced his mother and refused to leave his condemned comrades. Instead, he calmly walked over to the executioner and offered his head.

Banda himself was kept alive till the last, to witness all the brutality and then to be torn slowly to pieces but not before his five-year-old son was hacked to death before his eyes. During it all, Banda remained calm, never showing any fear or sign of pain, never uttering a sound, and seemed placid, as if in a trance. Ironically even more than his battlefield victories, it was the manner in which Banda conducted himself in defeat and death that left behind an indelible mark; an unshakable faith in the righteousness of his cause and certainty of its final victory. When the details of his death and stoic acceptance reached Punjab, even those Sikhs who had parted company with him while he lived proudly owned him up as a hero. Banda was declared a martyr and inspired many more martyrs in the coming years.

Though Banda eventually lost the military struggle; his brief sojourn was like a tornado had struck Punjab for nothing was the same ever again. Old estates were

gone and so were many old Mughal ruling families. The economy that mainly supported the ruling elite took a big hit as commerce broke down and the newly empowered peasants resisted paying revenue. The former low castes refused to go back to the old days so that even more than two centuries later, a British observer was to comment on the noticeably 'flat' caste hierarchy in Punjab as compared to rest of India. More importantly, the myth of Mughal superiority was broken, and the fear of the Mughals was gone. No doubt Banda's war was a civil war among the Punjabis that briefly even caused a schism among the Sikhs, but his courageous life and death left a lasting mark on the Sikh psyche so that in the end he left them more united and determined than ever before. From then onwards, the Khalsa became even more determined and fearless; they spurned all temptations, scoffed off all threats, rejected all pleas of truce, paid in blood for blood until the last of the Mughals were ejected from Punjab.

Banda died as he had lived; with superhuman self-confidence and an unflappable faith in the teachings of the Gurus. His personal attitude and the honor he showed to Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh became the gold standard for the code of conduct of the future Khalsa. Even after powerful Sikh chiefs emerged; right up to Ranjit Singh's formal investiture as the master of Punjab and beyond, Banda's original idea of a sovereign Khalsa brotherhood persisted. Coins continued to be minted in the Sikh realm in the name of the entire brotherhood with Banda's original inscriptions on them and the 'Raj' when it came, was called the Khalsa Raj. Leaders, including Ranjit Singh referred to themselves and were referred to by others, simply as Singh Sahib ji or the plain old, Khalsa ji, a practice that

originated in the days of Banda. Under Banda, the low caste Sikh converts, the Churas and Chamaars, from the traditional landless sweepers and scavengers castes briefly enjoyed absolute equality within the Khalsa brotherhood. That effect decayed over time as the Hindu cultural ecosystem eventually reasserted itself within the Khalsa fold but thanks to the thoroughness of Banda's original social engineering, even decades after his death, several low caste leaders were still leading Sikh Jathas.

The lessons of Banda's political strategy and battle tactics too were thoroughly internalized by the Khalsa and affected their behavior for the remainder of the century. His overtures at forming a broad anti Mughal coalition with the Rajputs beyond Punjab were unsuccessful, and so henceforth the Sikhs leaders never again looked for help beyond their own even though they spent the rest of the century fighting common enemies. Some of his military tactics such as trying to conquer and hold cities and forts or to fight pitched battles against heavily armed armies were unsuccessful so the Sikhs abandoned that strategy altogether, while other, spectacularly successful tactics, such as the two and half assaults or the 'Dhai Phat'; became a signature Sikh tactic. Most important of all, Banda showed the Punjabis what self-rule looked like, ever so briefly but once he had fired their imaginations, they never looked back until they had won complete freedom.

But the final and most important lesson of Banda's life and death, that is often overlooked; is a philosophical one. *'When a strong strikes the strong, the heart bears no burden; but if a powerful tiger attacks a flock of sheep, then its master*

must answer for it' Guru Nanak had written metaphorically, about the suffering of the innocents during war. Banda's parting words, accepting moral responsibility for the excesses of his rebellion, demonstrated that he truly understood the Nanakian message and so held himself to a much higher moral standard than others, something that was unheard of among revolutionary warriors, not only in those troubled times but even today. It is for that reason perhaps Banda should not only be known as the 'Banda, the Brave One' but even more appropriately as 'Banda, the Upright One'.

I think, Guru Gobind Singh would agree.

Epilogue

BANDHI BIR

(A POEM)

Bandhi Bir

(A poem by Rabindranath Tagore translated by Saumya Dey)

On the banks of the rivers five,
His locks coiled upon his head,
Has risen the Sikh
Inspired by his Gurus' writ
With unrelenting tread.
Waver or fear he does not.
"Hail the Gurus," the quarters resound
With the cry that rises
From voices that in thousands abound.
Thus has the Sikh risen,
His gaze fixated unblinking
Upon the new sun of dawn.
"Alakh Niranjana," -
The great cry breaks all fetters,

Scatters all fears.
While close to the breast,
With a joy so great,
Rattles the sword.
Today, all Punjab raises the roar
"Alakh Niranjan."

Today is the day
When a million hearts
Know no doubts
Nor bear any debts.
Life and death
Are as slaves at their feet
Of all worries are their spirits freed.
Such a day has arrived indeed
Upon the ten banks bounding
The rivers five.

Upon the ramparts
Of the palace in Delhi

The Emperor worries

Unable to sleep -

'Whose voices churn the heavens,
Shatter the night so silent and deep,

The fire from whose torches
The brow of the sky scorches?'

On the banks of the rivers five

Gushes blood devout

From a million hearts so stout.

As flocks of birds, souls so many

Rush to their nests.

The mothers of the braves

With blood anoint their brows

Upon the banks of the rivers five.

In war, each other

Mughal and Sikh face,

And fall

Clasping in a death embrace.

One the other battles
As a falcon, poison rent,
Battles a serpent.
In fray so terrible that day
"Victory to the Gurus," the brave Sikhs say,
The cry from a deep store of peace hails.
While the Mughal, blood maddened,
"Deen, Deen" yells.

At the fort in Gurdaspur
Was Banda captured
By the Turani legion.
Chaining him
As they will a lion
Delhi's road they take.
Thus of Banda in battle
A prisoner did they make.

The Mughal soldiers lead the way,
Upon the road, clouds of dust appear.

The severed heads of Sikhs they display
Impaled upon spears.
Seven hundred Sikhs, their chains rattling,
In the soldiers' wake walk following.
Multitudes gather by the way, jostling for space,
Many windows are thrown open, many eyes gaze.
The Sikhs roar, "Victory to the Gurus,"
For their own lives, they do not sorrow.
Thus, today,
Mughal and Sikh walk Delhi's way

The Sikhs jostle in impatience
To be the first to die,
As a day ends,
And night draws nigh
Line they up and at terminator's hands
Saying "Victory to the Gurus"
A hundred braves give up their hundred heads.

Thus, a week was past

And the seven hundredth life

Was taken at last.

Then a Qazi put on Banda's lap

One of his sons.

"With unconcern

Must you slay your son,"

The Qazi said.

With these words, his hands fettered,

Was Banda his little son given.

Banda's speech lay at rest.

Tenderly, his little son

He drew to his breast.

For a moment, he put his right hand upon the boy's head,

Once Banda kissed his turban red.

Then from his girdle

He pulled his dagger.

Looking upon his son, "Victory to the Gurus,"

Banda whispered in his ear,

"Fear not my son," said he.

That form so new

Shone with fervor.

A song from that young voice flew

Over the court which was a-tremor.

"Victory to the Gurus, all fear is a mirage,"

Sang the little boy

Looking at Banda's visage.

Then Banda curled his left arm

Around the boy's neck.

While his right hand, unwavering, firm

With a dagger did the child's breast rake.

"Victory to the Gurus," the child cried

And fell upon the earth and died.

The court stood silent!

Banda's form

The terminator did rend

With heated tongs.

Banda died a death stoic,
Not once did the brave moan,
He was a man heroic.
Not once did Banda in pain cry.
Of the onlookers,
Horror shut every eye
In stunned silence,
the court watched by.

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A MAN CALLED BANDA

Today is the day
When a million hearts
Know no doubts
Nor bear any debts.
Life and death
Are as slaves at their feet
Of all worries are their spirits freed.
Such a day has arrived indeed
Upon the ten banks bounding
The rivers five.

THE END