Chapter 5

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The Sikhs who made such a sudden and startling appearance on the stage of history represent the youngest of the major religions of India. Tracing their origins to their first guru, Nanak, who was active in the first half of the 16th century they acquired their distinctive identity only towards the latter part of the 17th century, under the tenth and last Guru, Gobind. But for him they would probably have remained one among the many reformists. Cults and sects which have periodically revolted against Brahminical domination. But Guru Gobind Singh, as he now styled himself, gave them a distinctive militant character. The core of the new faith was the khalsa, a kind of military brotherhood sworn to resist injustice and tyranny, in some ways comparable to the orders of European chivalry which personified the militant aspect of the Christian church.

Guru Gobind passed away in the Deccan in November 1708. His father Guru Tegh Bahadur had been executed in Delhi in 1675 and much of his life had been spent in arms against the imperial power, represented by the Faujdar Wazir Khan of Sirhind, in whose jurisdiction fell Anandpur, the seat of his authority. Two young sons were killed in battle, two others, still children fell into his hands and were sealed alive in the
vaults of the citadel, which became thus the visible symbol of oppression and tyranny.

That the Guru himself had no ambition of attacking or challenging the imperial authority per se in clear from the manner in which, after the death of Aurangzeb, he paid his respects to Bahadur Shah, and according to the Sikh traditions he is credited with having fought at Jajau with a band of his followers on his side. His object appears to have been to raise his followers from the status of servile subjects of a despotic monarchy to the level of freemen who would not brook any man’s tyranny and could look any badshah in his eyes, be he Turk or Indian.

After his military contribution to the enthronement of Bahadur Shah, the Guru for some unexplained reason retired to the Deccan, where on the banks of Godavari he ran into a bairagi by the name of Madhav Das, a Rajput by birth, who dabbled in sorcery and lived the life of a recluse.¹

Some how this dubious character became the Guru’s chela, and as he lay dying following a murderous assault by an Afghan horse trader, the Guru designated him heir to his temporal inheritance, the spiritual guru gaddi having ceased with himself.

¹ Ganda Singh, *Banda Singh Bahadur*, p. 1. His original name was Lachhman Dev or Lachhim Das. He was given the name of Madhav Das upon his initiation into the bairagi order.
Whatever may be the truth as to his origin and antecedents, this man was now sent off secretly from the Dakhin. At the same time letters were written to the Punjab, informing the disciples that their Guru had been slain in the Emperor's camp by the dagger of an Afghan. But just before his death, their leader had announced that in a short time, through the power of transmigration, he would appear again clothed with sovereignty, and whenever he should raise the standard of independence, they would be joining him secure prosperity in this world and salvation in the next, immediate collection of cash and goods must be made. Expectation was thus aroused, and the new manifestation awaited.

On 4 May 1710 when the emperor was near the Narmada, news was received from the Diwan of Lahore and Sirhind under a man who gave himself out as Guru Govind. The emperor ordered the various faujdars to take suitable action, but the uprising spread rapidly and on 22 May 1710, Wazir Khan, the faujdar of Sirhind was defeated and killed and the town ravaged and plundered.

With the help of the local hill rajas and other (upper class) Hindu allies, and by relentless pressure Aurangzeb had been successful in crushing the rebellion of Guru Govind. But the underlying causes of the trouble had remained. When Bahadur Shah marched from Lahore to contest the throne with Azam, Guru Govind joined him at the head of a
small following, and received a *mansab*. After the death of Guru Govind Singh, there was apparent peace in the Punjab till the beginning of the Sikh uprising under Banda who gave himself out as Guru Govind Singh. It was an age of superstition and the masses could easily be imposed upon. All contemporary authorities agree that the Guru drew his main support from the lower classes – the Jats and Khatris and ‘people of such ignoble professions, as the scavengers and leather dressers. Banda, the ‘false guru’, amassed a following of 7,000–8,000 men with 4,000–5,000 ponies at first, but soon increased his strength to 17,000 and then to 40,000 well armed men.\(^2\)

Banda’s first clash with the imperial authorities was at Sonepat near Delhi where the faujdar came out with a small force to disperse what he thought were mere rabble. But he was unpleasantly surprised and had to beat a hasty retreat and shut himself up in his fort. Thus emboldened, Banda turned towards Sirhind where Wazir Khan\(^3\), now in his eightieth years was still the faujdar.

As a prelude to the attack on the seat of the sarkar, Sadhawa was first sacked. Wazir Khan hurriedly mustered what troops he could and attacked Banda’s force with about 4,000 cavalry about 14 miles from

\(^2\) *Muntakhab-ut Lubab*, ii, 562.

\(^3\) Muhammad Jan, entitled first Kar Talab Khan, then Wazir Khan rank 3000. The *Shamsheer-i Khalsa*, 186, states that he was a native of Kunjpura, a town in the Karnal district.
Sirhind. At first the imperialists seemed to gaining but a sudden attack in the rear, a clever flanking move on the part of Banda, turned the tables. Wazir Khan did not flinch but continued fighting till he was killed.

His body was strung up from a tree his baggage plundered and then the Sikhs, flushed with victory fell upon the defenseless town. For four days it was looted, its mosques defiled, and houses pillaged and burnt.

Banda established himself in the Shivalik foothills not far from Sadhaura and adjoining the territories of the Raja of Sirmoor, or the ‘Barfi’ Raja (the snow king) as he was called by the Mughals. He named it Lohgarh and assumed the style and manner of an independent ruler.

It was in December 1710 that the Emperor at last reached Lohgarh – ‘the Refuge of the World, the walled city, ornament of the Fortune throne as it was described on the coins reportedly struck by Banda.4 The place was invested and it seemed that Banda had reached the end of his road.

It was not as if the activities of the Sikh bands had been limited to the Cis-Sutluj region of the Delhi Sabha. The news of the fall and sack of the Sirhind had an electrifying effect on the Sikhs of the Punjab, Sikh bands had ravaged the Batala and Kalanaur parganas of the Bari Doab, right upto the environs of Lahore. Banda had crossed the sutlej and

clashed with Shams Khan, faujdar of Jalandhar. The entire central Punjab was in the ferment.⁵ The rising had sent call to all oppressed and the downtrodden, not merely the Sikhs, the peasants and others, but also the untouchables tanners and scavengers – the victims of Brahminical oppression as much as of Mughal tyranny. It partook in part some of the character of a revolution.

In these areas, the Sikhs set up their own administration. They appointed their own thanedars and tahsildars to collect revenue and appointed commandants in the towns they over run. Usually these officers were chosen from the lower classes. ‘A low scavenger or leather dresser had only to leave his home and join the Guru, when in a short space of time he would return to his birth place with his order of appointment in his hand’.⁶

Even after making an allowance for exaggeration in such statements, the character of the Sikh uprising as a specific form of a lower class movement seems undeniable. The Sikhs persecuted the upper class Hindus no less than the Muslims, and, in most places, the local Hindu zamidnars and wealthy people sided with the Mughal Government. But the Sikhs lacked any clear social and political objectives. The necessary economic basis for the creation of a new and higher social order was

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⁵. Muntakhab ut Lubab, 660, 672.
⁶. Mirat-i Waridat, 392; William Irvine, The later Mughals, i, 98.
lacking. The most that the Sikhs could aim at was a rough kind of egalitarian society with a peasant clan basis. Such an attempt was bound to evoke the hostility of the privileged classes and hence, could only hope to succeed if it could rapidly mobilize a large and growing number of peasants. But the religious basis of the Sikh movement restricted its appeal, and made a more rapid growth of the movement difficult.\(^7\)

Consequently, the imperialists were able to recover from their initial surprise, and to assume the counter offensive against the Sikhs. Asad Khan was ordered to march against the Guru. Chin Qulich Khan, Muhammad Amin Khan, Khan-i-Jahan the Governor of Allahabad, Saiyid Abdullah Khan Baraha and many others were deputed to help him and suitable advances were made to them for competing their preparations.\(^8\) At the end of June, the Emperor left Ajmer and himself marched against the Sikhs. After opening the road between Delhi and Lahore which had been closed for many months, Bahadur Shah fixed his headquarters at Sadhaura near the foothills of the Himalayas where the Sikhs had built several forts for refuge. Lohgarh\(^9\) which had been built by Guru Govind and where he and afterwards Banda lived is some sort of regal splendour, was stormed in December 1710. But unknown to the

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\(^7\) Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, p. 90.
\(^8\) Akhbarat, 28 June, 6 and 9 July, 1710.
\(^9\) Situated half way between Nahan and Sadhaura. Islam Shah son of Sher Shah, had began to build a fort here under the name of Pawagarh. It was left unfinished at his death; the ruins remained till Banda restored.
imperialist there was one secret path that was left unguarded and it was this that Banda used for his escape. He left behind one of his followers, a tobacconist named Gulabu who resembled him, dressed in royal finery. Gulabu was captured and the news was brought to Munim who passed it to the emperor and at the same time asked the band to strike up the triumphal music. But soon it was discovered that the hawk had flown and only the owl had been netted.\(^{10}\) Gulabu's true identity was soon exposed and the emperor flew into a rage and publicly unbraided his wazir for incompetence. Munim Khan was so affected by the firing he had received from his royal that he fell into a deep depression. According to some authorities, the fierce approaches of the emperor hastened the death of the wazir.

After the escape of Banda from Lohgarh, Bahadurshah seems to have lost interest in the affairs of the Sikhs. He returned to Lahore, leaving the imperial armies to continue operations against Banda. Thereafter, desultory fighting continued, with the Imperial troops not advancing beyond the foothills and the Guru making occasional descents into the plains for purposes of plunder. The Imperial commanders, Rustam dil and M Amin Khan chased in vain after the Guru who adopted guerilla tactics and refused to face the imperialists in a pitched battle.

Evidently, the Guru had considerable local support in the plains. Thus, when he invaded the Baith Jalandhar, the Mughal commander withdrew in panic and local Sikhs and their supporters seized the opportunity to slaughter the mughal stragglers, and put their own armed posts in the towns of Batala and Kalanaur and in the surrounding villages. When the Imperial armies re-established their sway, they took drastic action against the Sikhs and their sympathizers, many of the innocent suffering with the guilty.\(^{11}\) There was a spy scare in the royal camp itself, where many people were suspected of secretly being Sikhs and of passing on information to the Guru. Hence an order was issued that all Hindus should shave their beards.\(^{12}\) Hindu *faqirs*, *yogis* and *sanyasis* who were suspected of spying for the Guru were also expelled from the royal camp.\(^{13}\)

Inspite of these precautious and efforts and the presence of the emperor, the operations against the Guru were not very fruitful. One cause of this was the mutual jealousy and quarrel of the two Mughal commanders, which led to the disgrace and imprisonment of Rustam Dil in September 1711. In Jan. 1712, when the emperor died, M. Amin Khan

\(^{11}\) Irvine Williams, *The later Mughals*, I, 119.
\(^{13}\) *Akbarat*, 5, 9 Nov. 1711.
abandoned his post to take part in the civil war at Lahore and the Guru, seizing his opportunity recovered Sadhaura and Lohgarh.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus, in spite of concentrating large armies and the best generals in the Punjab for a year and a half, Bahadur Shah failed to crush the Sikh uprising. The basic cause of this must be considered not so much the weakness of the Imperialists as the nature of the Sikh uprising and the tactics of the Guru.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibrat Nama, Mirza Muhammad, 42b-46b, Irvine, I, 121.