
GREAT FIGHTER'S OF PUNJAB FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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ABSTRACT

The last to lay arms and foremost to raise them against the British, the Sikhs of Punjab may not figure prominently in the galaxy of freedom fighters led by Mahatma Gandhi barring Shaheed Bhagat Singh, who, too, was consistently disowned by Bapu, but the contribution of the Sikh people to the freedom struggle is no mean.

INTRODUCTION:

It is believed in all quarters that but for the intrigues in the post-Ranjit Singh's Sikh hierarchy and the malicious strategy of the White man, the Sikhs could not have been defeated in 1849 the way they were. Despite this undeserved ignominy, there were ever so many incidents of defiance of the foreign rule by the Sikh soldiers and political activists. However, an organized peaceful crusade was launched by Baba Ram Singh Nandhari (he is addressed as Satguru Ram Singh by his followers) in 1869. It was essentially a socio-religious movement which became "a dynamic political force" in due course. They protested against cow slaughter, advocated widow re-marriage, and would have nothing to do with the British educational institutions, even the mail and tap water. They wore spotless khadi and were devoted to meditation with woolen rosary.

Amritsar being the holy city, cow-slaughter was forbidden in it. But later not only was it permitted, the ban lifted, an abattoir was established next to the Golden Temple. This infuriated the Nandharis who butchered many a butcher in the town. At this the British without due enquiry had 65 Nandharis tied with the barrels of cannons and blown to bits. Baba Ram Singh had no hand in it, but the British availed of this opportunity and deported him to Rangoon on January 18, 1872. The technique of non-co-operation adopted by Mahatma Gandhi is preceded by the Nandhari crusade by boycotting British institutions and trying to be self-sufficient with the native ways and means. Among the principal organizers of the freedom struggle in this province in the 19th century, the outstanding names were those of Bhai Maharaj Singh, Maharani Jindan, Sardar Chattar Singh Attarivala, and Baba Ram Singh Namdhari

BHAI MAHARAJ SINGH:

Bhai Maharaj Singh was a saintly person turned revolutionary who led an anti-British movement in the Punjab after the first Anglo-Sikh war, was born Nihal Singh at the village of Rabbon, in Ludhiana district. He had a religious bent of mind and came under the influence of Bhai Bir Singh of Naurangabad. After the latter's death in 1844, he succeeded him as head of the Naurangabad dera and was held in high esteem by a vast following, including most of the Sikh chiefs and courtiers.

Maharaj Singh's revolutionary career started with the Prema conspiracy case involving him in a plot to murder the British resident, Henry Lawrence, and other pro-British officers of the Lahore Darbar. Maharaj Singh, whose movements were restricted to Naurangabad by the British, went underground. The government confiscated his property at Amritsar and announced a reward for his arrest. Bhai Maharaj Singh intensified his activities against the British when he came to know that Diwan Mul Raj had in April 1848 raised a standard of revolt against them at Multan. He left for Multan with 400 horsemen to join hands with Mul Raj. But soon differences arose between the two leaders, and Maharaj Singh left Multan for Hazara in June 1848 to seek Chatar Singh Atarivala's assistance in his plans to dislodge the British.

In November 1848, he joined Raja Sher Singh's forces at Ramnagar and was seen in the battlefield riding his black mare and exhorting the Sikh soldiers to lay down their lives for the sake of their country. Thereafter he took part in the battles of Chelianvala and Gujrat, but, when Raja Sher Singh surrendered to the British at Rawalpindi on 14 March 1849, he resolved to carry on the fight single-handed. He escaped to Jammu and made Dev Batala his secret headquarters. In December 1849, he went to Hoshiarpur and visited the Sikh regiments to enlist their support. Bhai Maharaj Singh, who carried on his head a price of 10,000 rupees, was arrested on 28 December 1849 at Adampur.

"The Guru is no ordinary man," wrote Dr Vansittart, the Jalandhar deputy commissioner, who had arrested him. "He is to the natives what Jesus is to the most zealous of Christians. His miracles were seen by tens of thousands and are more implicitly believed than those worked by the ancient prophets." Vansittart was so greatly impressed by Bhai Maharaj Singh's personality that he recommended special treatment to be accorded him, but the government did not wish to take any risks and deported him to Singapore, along with one of his followers Kharak Singh where, after several years of solitary confinement, he died on 5 July 1856. He had gone blind before the end came.

MAHARANI JIND KAUR:

Maharani Jind Kaur was popularly known as Jindan, was wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and mother of Maharaja Duleep Singh, the last Sikh sovereign of the Punjab. She was daughter of Manna Singh, an Aulakh Jatt of Gujranwala, who held an humble position at the court as an overseer of the royal kennels. Scant notice of Maharani Jind Kaurs taken either by the official Lahore diarist, Sohan Lal Suri, or the British records until 1838, when according to the former, a munshi brought the blessed tidings of the birth of a son to her it appears that she and her son lived a life of obscurity under the care of Raja Dhian Singh at Jammu in August 1843, the young prince and her mother were brought to Lahore in September 1843, both Maharaja Sher Singh and Dhian Singh were assassinated. Raja Hera Singh, Dhian Singh's son, with the support of the army and chiefs, wiped out the Sandhawalia faction Shortly after, Hira Singh captured the Fort of Lahore and on 16 September 1845, the army proclaimed minor Duleep Singh the sovereign of the State Hira Singh was appointed the wazir.

The political history of Jind Kaur begins from that date Gradually, she assumed the role of a de jure regent to the minor Maharaja Both Hira Singh and his adviser, Pandit Jalla, did not allow her the courtesy and consideration she was entitled to. Her establishment was put under the control of Misr Lal Singh. Jind Kaur mobilized opinion at the Darbar against the dominance of the Dogras. She and her brother, Jawahar Singh, pleaded with the army panchayats (regimental committees) to banish Pandit Jalla and protect the rights of minor Duleep Singh "Who is the real sovereign?" she angrily asked the regimental committees assembled in council "Duleep Singh or Hira Singh? If the fanner, then the Khalsa should ensure that he was not a king with an empty title" The council assured the Rani that Duleep Singh was the real king of the Punjab. The army generals treated Jind Kaur with deference and addressed her as Mai Sahib or mother of the entire Khalsa Commonwealth.

The eclipse of the Jalla regime was a political victory for Maharani Jind Kaur, who had goaded the army to overthrow Hira Singh and install her brother Jawahar Singh as the Wazir. She now assumed control of the government with the approval of the army generals who declared that they would place her on the throne of Delhi

Jind Kaur proclaimed she regent and cast off her veil She became the symbol of the sovereignty of the Khalsa ruling the Punjab in the name of her son. She reviewed the troops and addressed them, held court and transacted state business in public. She reconstituted the supreme Khalsa Council by giving representation to

the principal sardars and restored a working balance between the army panchayats and the civil administration.

Numerous vexatious problems confronted the Maharani. First, An alarm was created that an English force was accompanying Peshaura Singh to Lahore, and that he was being helped secretly by Gulab Singh Second, the troops clamored for a raise in their pay The feudatory chiefs demanded the restoration of their resumed jagirs, remission of fines and reduction of enhanced taxes and burdens imposed upon them by Hira Singh., Finally, it appeared that the diminishing revenues of the State could not balance the increasing cost of the civil and military administration.

Jind Kaur applied herself to the solution of these problems and secured to this end the assistance of a newly appointed council of elder statesmen and military generals Kanvar Pashaura Singh was summoned to Lahore and persuaded to return to his Jagir Early in 1845, a force 35,000 strong marched to Jammu for the chastisement of Gulab Singh. The council had accused him of being a traitor to the Panth and charged him with treachery and intrigue against his sovereign. In April 1845, the army returned to Lahore with the Dogra chief as a hostage. The pay of the soldiery was enhanced and Jawahar Singh was formally installed Wazir. Maharani Jind Kaur's choice of Jawahar Singh as Wazir became the subject of criticism. To counteract the rising disaffection, Jind Kaur hastily betrothed Duleep Singh, in the powerful Atan family, opened top negotiations with Gulab Singh and promised higher pay to the soldiery. When Jawahar Singh was assassinated by the army Panchayats suspecting his hand in the murder of Kanvar Pashayra Singh, Jind Kaur gave vent to her anguish with loud lamentation. Early in November 1845, she, with the approval of the Khalsa Council, nominated Misar Lal Singh to the office of wazir.

In December 1846, Maharani Jind Kaur surrendered political power to the council of ministers appointed by the British Resident after the treaty of Bharoval. The Sikh Darbar Ceased to exist as a sovereign political body. The regent was dismissed with an annuity of Rs 1, 50,000 and "an officer of Company's artillery became, in effect, the successor to Ranjit Singh ".

Maharani Jind Kaur was treated with unnecessary acrimony and suspicion. She had retired gracefully to a life of religious devotion in the palace, yet mindful of the rights of her minor son as the sovereign of the Punjab. Henry Lawrence, the British Resident at Lahore, and Viscount Hardinge both accused her of fomenting intrigue and influencing the Darbar politics. After Bharoval, Hardinge had issued instructions that she must be deprived of all political power in March 1847, he expressed the view that she must be sent away from Lahore.

At the time of Tej Singh's investiture as Raja of Sialkot in August 1847, it was suspected that the young Maharaja had refused to confer the title on him at the instigation of his mother. She was also suspected of having a hand in what is known as the Premilla Plot a conspiracy designed to murder the British Resident and Tej Singh at a fete at the Shalamar Gardens. Although neither of the charges against Jind Kaur could be substantiated on enquiry, she was removed to Sheikhpura in September 1847, and her allowance was reduced to Rs 48,000. Lord Dalhousie, instructed Sir Frederick Currie, the British Resident at Lahore, to expel her from the Punjab. Currie acted promptly. He implicated Jind Kaur in a fictitious plot and sent her away from Sheikhpura to Banaras. She remained interned at Banaras under strict surveillance in 1848, allegations were made by Major Macgregor, in attendance on her, that she was in correspondence with Mulraj and Sher Singh at Multan. A few of her letters were intercepted and an alarm was created when one of her slave girls escaped from Banaras. She was removed to the Fort of Chunar from where she escaped to Nepal disguised as a maid-servant

Maharani Jind Kaur arrived at Kathmandu on 29 April 1849. The British Government promptly confiscated her jewelry worth Rs 9, 00,000 and stopped her pension. At Kathmandu, the sudden appearance of the widow of Ranjit Singh was both unexpected and unwelcome. Yet Jung Bahadur, the prime minister, granted her asylum, mainly as a mark of respect to the memory of the late Maharaja Ranjit Singh. A residence was assigned to her at Thapathall, on the banks of the Vagmati river, and the Nepalese government settled upon her an allowance for her maintenance. The Nepal Residency papers relate the details of Jind Kaur's unhappy sojourn in Nepal till 1860. The British Residency in Kathmandu kept a vigilant eye on her throughout. It believed that she was engaged in political intrigue to secure the revival of the Sikh dynasty in the Punjab. Under constant pressure from the British, the Nepal Darbar turned hostile towards the Maharani and levied the most humiliating restrictions on her. But the forlorn widow of Ranjit Singh remained undaunted. She quietly protested against the indignities and restrictions imposed upon her by Jung Bahadur. Jung Bahadur expelled from the valley one of her attendants, and the Maharani dismissed the entire staff foisted upon her by the Nepalese Government. She was then ordered to appear in person in the Darbar to acknowledge Nepalese hospitality, which she refused to do. The breach between her and Jung Bahadur widened. The Nepal Residency Records tell us that an open rift took place, and "several scenes occurred in which each seemed to have given way to temper, to have addressed the other in very insulting language."

Towards the end of 1860, it was signified to Maharani Jind Kaur that her son, Maharaja Duleep Singh, was about to return to India and that she could visit him in Calcutta. She welcomed the suggestion and travelled to Calcutta to meet her son, who took her with him to England. Maharani Jind Kaur died at Kensington, England, on 1 August 1863.

SARDAR CHATAR SINGH:

Chatar Singh was the son of Jodh Singh Atā rī vā lā . He had two sons, Raja Sher Singh Attariwalla and Avtār Singh. Sher Singh dealt a devastating blow on the army of the British East India Company at the Battle of Chillianwala. His daughter Tej Kaur was betrothed to Duleep Singh, but after the First Anglo-Sikh War the British Resident, Sir Frederick Currie did not honour the betrothal.

On the death of his father in 1805, Chatar Singh inherited large jagirs and occupied himself with farming his estates. He rose into political prominence in 1843, after the assassination of Maharaja Sher Singh, and his daughter Tej Kaur was betrothed to Maharaja Duleep Singh. In 1846 he was made Governor of Peshawar and the following year the Council of Regency recommended him for the title of Raja, but he asked that instead the title be conferred on his son, Sher Singh.

In 1848 he was appointed as Governor of the Hazara province. There he came into conflict with Captain James Abbott the British Deputy Commissioner of the Hazara District. Abbott alleged that Chatar Singh was conspiring to subvert British authority in the Punjab. The British Resident at Lahore, Sir Frederick Currie commissioned an investigation by Captain John Nicholson who exonerated Chatar Singh, and also justified the defensive measures he had taken to save the besieged capital of Hazā rā from Abbott's Muhammadan mercenaries. Despite this, Currie virtually dismissed Chatar Singh and confiscated his jagirs. After this, and the failure of the Resident to honour the betrothal of his sister, Sher Singh, who had been fighting alongside the British, changed sides. In the second Anglo-Sikh War, Sher Singh inflicted a serious blow on the British at the Battle of Chillianwala, but was defeated at the subsequent Battle of Gujrat. Following the battle, Chatar Singh and his sons, Rājā Sher Singh and Avtār Singh, were imprisoned at first at Allā hā bā d and then at Fort William at Calcutta.

BABA RAM SINGH:

Ram Singh Kuka was a soldier, a religious leader and a prominent contributor to the Indian freedom movement. He was the founder of the Kuka movement. His policy of non-cooperation with the British was immensely popular among the masses, mainly in Punjab. Ram Singh was born at Bhaini in Ludhiana district

of Punjab in 1816. He joined as a soldier in the Sikh army and there he came under the influence of Bhai Balak Singh. After Balak Singh's death he took up the responsibility of the missionary works. He fought against the caste system among Sikhs, encouraged inter-caste marriages and widow remarriages.

Ram Singh was strongly opposed to the British rule and he started an intense non-cooperation movement against them. Led by him, the people boycotted English education, mill made cloths and other imported goods. The Kuka or the Namdhari movement picked momentum with time and the British reacted violently killing many Kuka freedom fighters. Ram Singh was promptly deported to Rangoon. Later on he was sent to Andaman under life imprisonment. He passed away on November 29, 1885.

Baba Ram Singh had such a great influence on his followers that even after his death they refused to believe that he was really dead and would return again to guide them. His method of non-cooperation and civil disobedience was later adopted by Mahatma Gandhi.

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