

The Contemporaries : Guru Gobind Singh and Bahadur Shah

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Abstract

When Aurangzeb died in 1707, his eldest son Bahadur Shah was in Afghanistan. His younger brother Muhammad Azim took possession of the throne. When the war of succession began, Bahadur Shah sent requested Guru Ji to help him in attaining the throne. Guru Gobind Singh sent Bhai Dharam Singh to help Bahadur Shah in the war of succession and ultimately Bahadur Shah ascended the throne. After that Bahadur Shah expressed strong desire to see the Guru and requested the latter to meet him at Agra. Bahadur Shah welcomed the Guru in Agra Fort and presented several valuable presents to the Guru. In November 1707, Bahadur Shah had to march to Deccan and invited the Guru to accompany him. Guru separated from him at Nanded.

Some Indian and foreign writers mistakenly mentioned that the Guru had taken the service under emperor Bahadur Shah. On the other hand, some say that the Guru went to the Deccan because he felt dejected and wanted a change. Some says Guru's accompanied the Bahadur Shah to press the latter to fulfill his promise to do justice. Emperor also wanted to obtain the Guru's help in his fight with the Marathas. Bahadur Shah also wanted to keep away Guru Gobind Singh from Punjab. He was dodging the Guru on his promise. When the Guru knew the emperor's mind felt disinclined to go any further with him.

KEYWORDS: Aurangzeb, Bahadur Shah, Guru Gobind Singh, Agra, Nanded, Deccan, Khalsa, Emperor.

In the last week of the month of February, 1707, when Aurangzeb died, his eldest son, Bahadur Shah was away in Afghanistan. His younger brother, Muhammad Azim, who was in the Deccan with Aurangzeb, usurped the throne. Bahadur Shah hastened to fight for his father's throne because his younger brother was better equipped.¹ So he had to look out for assistance wherever he could expect to get it. He had heard about the victories of Guru Gobind Singh against the Hill Chiefs and the imperial forces. It was true that the Guru's power had been apparently broken and most of his soldiers dispersed, still Bahadur Shah knew that a word from the Guru could bring hundreds of soldiers into the field who would never desert him or fly from the field. There was nothing low or unusual in his asking for the Guru's help because any sensible man in the position of Bahadur Shah would have looked for allies in all directions but it was natural for him to invite the Master of the Khalsa to his aid.

Bhai Nand Lal, a courtier of Bahadur Shah, had taken shelter at the Guru's darbar for a long time and then on his advice, the Prince had once sought and obtained the Guru's blessings. When the war of succession began, Bahadur Shah sent Bahi Nand Lal to the Guru and requested him to help him in attaining the throne. Bhai Nand Lal met the Guru at Bhagaur in Rajputana, explained to him all that had happened, and conveyed to

1. H.R. Gupta, *History of the Sikh Gurus*, 1973, New Delhi, p.226

him Bahadur Shah's request for help in the war of succession. To the Guru there appeared to be nothing objectionable or against his ideals in helping a lawful claimant to the throne who was also a better man than his usurping brother. So, Guru Gobind Singh sent Bhai Dharm Singh along with a band of his chosen Saint warriors. He also sent through them an order to the Khalsa to render all possible help to Bahadur Shah in the ensuing war of succession.²

On June 8, 1707, a battle was fought at Jajau, near Agra, in which Bahadur Shah was victorious. His brother, Azam, was defeated and killed, and he ascended the throne. He then dispatched Bhai Dharm Singh to inform the Guru of the victory and thank him on his behalf for his valuable help. He also expressed his strong desire to see the Guru, but pleaded that he himself was too busy to go to Guru, and hence, requested the latter to meet him at Agra.³

The Guru accepted the emperor's invitation. He retraced his steps to the north and met Bahadur Shah at Agra on July 24, 1707. He was received with the honour due to an ally and holy man.⁴ Bahadur Shah stood up and come forward to receive and welcome the Guru. Emperor was greatly impressed by the glow of the Guru's face, out of respect he placed both his hands on the Guru's feet. Bahadur Shah gave the Guru a robe of honour and a jewelled scarf (*dhukh dhukhi*) worth 60 thousand rupees.⁵ The emperor presented all the articles to the Guru with his own hands. He also wanted to earmark a big estate in the name of the Guru but the Guru refused it, because with this from a creator and liberator of nation he would have been reduced to the position of a mere chieftain. The establishment of temporal power for himself had never been his ambition. He contended himself with urging the emperor to restrain his lieutenants and qazis from irreligious persecution of Hindus and Sikhs and to punish the guilty ones.

The Guru remained with the emperor for a pretty long time, i.e. from July to November, 1707. Bahadur Shah was of a milder disposition and far more tolerant in religious matters than Aurangzeb. He greatly enjoyed the Guru's company and had very often religious discussions with him. The Guru was hopeful that he might be able to usher in an era of peace and, better understanding between the Muslims and the non-Muslims through persuasion and by using his influence with the emperor.⁶ He described to him the cruel and irreligious acts which this spirit had urged the Muhammdan rulers to perpetrate. The chief sinner in this respect was Wazir Khan. His deeds had perturbed even the pious though hard-hearted Aurangzeb. Bahadur Shah was greatly moved and he promised that, after he got firmly established on the throne, he would punish the murderer of the innocent children.⁷

Friendly discussions and negotiations were yet going on when, in November, 1707 Bahadur Shah had to march into Rajputana against the Kachhvahas and, there from, to the Deccan to suppress the insurrection of his brother Kam Bakhsh. He invited the Guru to accompany him. The Guru had never advocated bloodshed and the accession of

2. H.R. Gupta, op. cit., 229

3. Ibid

4. J.D. Cunningham, *History of the Sikhs*, Delhi, 2002 (reprint), p.79

5. Bahadur Shah Nama, July 23, 1707; *Gur Sobha*, XVI-35

6. Dr. Gopal Singh, *History of the Sikh People*, 1469-1978, New Delhi, 1979, p.317

7. Daulat Rai, *Sahib-e-Kamal*, Amritsar, 2000

Bahadur Shah had, at least, suspended the unjust persecution against which the Guru had vowed to fight. It seemed possible now to accomplish by persuasion and discussion what in the past had to be attempted with the sword and the spear. So the Guru promised to join him on the march and soon did so. They travelled together through Rajputana. Several Rajput Rajas came to pay homage to the Guru. They reached in the neighbourhood of Nanded on the margin of the Godavari.⁸

Some Indian and foreign writers like Elphinstone, Forester and Malcolm have mistakenly mentioned that the Guru had taken service under emperor Bahadur Shah and had, therefore, helped the latter in the war of succession. In the present paper efforts have been made to remove the misunderstanding related to the relations of Guru Gobind Singh with Bahadur Shah.

Khafi Khan has mentioned that “Gobind” while travelling with Bahadur Shah, along with two or three hundred horsemen, had developed ‘rafakat’ (friendship) with the emperor. If the Guru had taken service with the emperor, Khafi Khan would not have used the word ‘rafakat’. Khafi Khan was very inimical towards the Sikhs. Had the Guru actually taken service, he would have highlighted it in his writings.

Malcolm, though first agreeing with Forester, has later on contradicted him and said that it is not believable that Guru Gobind Singh who had suffered so much at the hands of the Mughals and who was known for his valour, uprightness and ever-readiness to punish the oppressors, could have even thought of taking service under a government against which he had been rebelling all along. Nor was it possible that the Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah, being aware of all the past happenings, could have confided in that rebellious Guru by taking him in his services.

The writer of Twarikh Bahadur Shahi⁹ has written that “At the time of Aurangzeb’s death, I was in Delhi. The Mughal army was marching towards Burhanpur in the Deccan. Guru Gobind Singh who was a descendent of Guru Nanak was also travelling in those districts alongside the imperial army. He was preaching to householders as well as the denunciative”.

Macauliffe, after reading many historic writings of the Sikhs and non-Sikhs, has written that Bahadur Shah asked for the Guru’s help, which the latter sent under charge of Dharam Singh, after the emperor had accepted certain conditions. Further, the Guru met the emperor in Agra, where he was presented with many gifts. He was also invited to stay with the emperor in Agra, as long as he liked. Obviously such a treatment could not have been extended to an employee.

Sainapat in his book “Gur Sobha” written in 1741 A.D. i.e. only 33 years after Guru Gobind Singh had passed away, has confirmed that the Guru had a meeting with emperor Bahadur Shah in which the latter presented to the Guru robes of honour and other precious gifts which the Guru accepted and asked his Sikhs to carry them to the place where he was staying. Such an honour could not have been extended to a person in royal service.

8. K.S. Duggal, *The Sikh Gurus : Their Lives and Teachings*, New Delhi, 1980, pp.212-213

9. Henry Elliot, *History of India as told by its own Historians*, vol. 7, London, 1877, p.566

Lala Daulat Ram Arya, while writing the biography of Guru Gobind Singh, has disagreed with Elphinstone that the Guru had accepted employment with Bahadur Shah. He is of the view that after taking all circumstances into consideration, it has to be accepted that just as Rajas extend help to each other in times of difficulty, Guru Gobind Singh also helped Bahadur Shah to win back the throne, particularly when he was the rightful claimant. The emperor gave many presents to the Guru in acknowledgement and appreciation of the help given. He also wanted to grant an estate in his name but it was refused by the Guru.

Lala Ghanaiya Lal has written in his book "History of the Punjab" that on receiving the news of Aurangzeb's death, Bahadur Shah sent his dewan Bhai Nand Lal to the Guru to request him for help in regaining the throne from his younger brother, Tara Azam. The Guru agreed and sent his Sikhs to fight on the side of Bahadur Shah. Tara Azam was killed with the arrows shot by the Guru. These arrows always carried one *tola* each of gold to help the victim's relatives to perform his last rites. Bahadur Shah after ascending the throne brought the Guru to the capital and honoured him.

Ahmed Shah Batalvi's "Umdat Twarikh" in which Bahadur Shah's own Persian words (translated from Punjabi) have been quoted in which he had welcomed the Guru in Agra, thanked him for his help and honoured him by presenting valuable gifts. He had also promised therein that he would try his best to fulfill the Guru's wishes.

Surinder Sharma has also written "Guru Gobind Singh received a letter from Prince Muazzam (Bahadur Shah) asking for the Guru's help. With friendly relations existing between the two, the Guru had promised to extend the desired help".

"After victory, a big darbar was held in Agra fort. Bahadur Shah was declared as the emperor and successor to Aurangzeb. Many Rajas and Sardars offered their presents to the new emperor. Thereafter, Bahadur Shah offered his heartfelt thanks to the Guru for his help and presented gifts and robes of honour to him as well as to his valiant sikhs."

Besides all these evidences, we have the order passed by Bahadur Shah on Nov. 7, 1708 A.D. (i.e. one month after the Guru's death) in which he permitted all the properties of Guru Gobind Singh to be returned to his heirs, instead of being confiscated as he did not want to retain any of the articles of a saint in royal treasury. How could the emperor express such views if the Guru had been in his employment?

From all these independent evidences, it is clear that the Guru did not accept any service under Bahadur Shah but only agreed to help him in the war of succession on the recommendation of his dear Sikh, Bhai Nand Lal, and with the intention of seeking justice from the emperor in the matter of atrocities committed by his Mughal officers. If the story presented by some Muslim writers that the Guru had been in the employment of the emperor writers should have also mentioned that why and when he left that service. Their silence on this point establishes the hollowness of their contention about Guru Gobind Singh taking service under the emperor.¹⁰

Some writers like Bute Shah and Malcolm, say that Guru Gobind Singh went to the Deccan because after the terrible reverses and bereavements which had been his lot, the Guru felt dejected and wanted a change. Still others believe that the Guru felt that

10. Cited in H.R. Gupta, op. cit., pp.216-217

though the seed of opposition to tyranny had been well sown in the Punjab, yet the Mughal rule was so firmly established there, that for some time to come, it would be difficult to gather afresh an army strong enough to challenge and rout the imperial forces. To sit idle and do nothing towards the furtherance of his ideals was distasteful to him. So he decided to try what could be done in the southern parts of India towards the fulfillment of his mission. He felt that what he had accomplished in the Punjab, eminently yet to a limited extent, could be achieved with greater ease and to a greater extent in the south, because the people there were more accustomed to the use of arms, and the Mughal rule was not so firmly established there. He had hopes of arousing in the Rajputs and Maharattas the will to do and dare for the holy task of liberating their country and uprooting the foreign tyrants rule. It is also said that the successors of Shivaji had made requests to the Guru for help.¹¹ It was with some such purpose that the Guru went southwards. The Rajputs welcomed him, listened to him, but felt themselves too weak to actively join a movement which was akin to rebellion against the emperor of Delhi. The Guru went still further. All along, he went on delivering his life-giving message to the people.¹² When Bahadur Shah sought to use him as his tool against the Marathas, he refused to oblige him and parted company. Still others, who implicitly believe in the Guru's spiritual powers, mentioned that he went to the Deccan to deliver Banda from snares of occultism and austerities, and depute him to the Punjab as the general and temporal leader of the Khalsa. Still others are of the view that the Guru's object in accompanying the emperor was to bring to a satisfactory conclusion the negotiations begun at Agra, and that, when he found that there was no hope of success in them, he separated from him.

The dejection theory of Bute Shah and Malcolm does not fit in with Guru's behaviour in the face of his severest losses, trials, and sufferings. Indeed, his whole life is itself a strong, irrefutable contradiction of the assertions of these prejudiced or misinformed critics. Did reverses and bereavements plunge him in gloom and dejection? As a child of less than ten he pointed out to his father the way to martyrdom for the sake of the wretched people. He lost his father and stood face to face with the formidable Mughal Empire at its zenith. Did that break his tender yet might heart? He saw his dearest sikhs killed before his eyes. He sent his two eldest sons unto certain death at Chamkaur. He had, by then, to all intents and purposes, lost the whole of his family-mother, sons, and wife. Did that plunge him in sorrow or dejection? If he had so deep an affection for them as could make him take their loss so much to heart, he could surely have saved them all, by a timely fight from Anandpur. 'As for me', he had declared, 'my body, my soul, my head, my wealth, yes my all, is dedicated to their (his Sikh's) service'. When his wife asked him where her four sons had gone, his reply was characteristic of his attitude towards the attachments of the world. He was bold and cheerful as ever. He had, said he sacrificed her four sons for the sake of the sons sitting before them. 'What then if thy four are gone? There yet live, and shall ever live, millions of our dear brave sons'. Is there a trace of grief or down heartedness in all this?

The whole tone and trend of his Zafarnama or Epistle of Victory addressed to Aurangzeb also show that the Guru was not, at all, plunged in despair. In fact, he

11. J.D. Cunningham, op. cit., p.79

12. K.S. Duggal, op. cit., p.213; Henry Elliot, op. cit., p.566

distinctly threatened the emperor in the words, 'What though my four sons have been killed; my young son, the Khalsa remains behind like a coiled snake. What bravery is it to quench a few sparks of life?' Wherever the Guru went in his travels, he exerted himself in the propagation of his ideals and in broadcasting his message of liberation. As his predecessor Guru Nanak, Guru Hargobind and Guru Teg Bahadur had gone on preaching tour, a similar impulse urged Guru Gobind Singh to carry his message to the warlike Maharattas and Rajputs and other people of the south.¹³

He went about baptizing people and adding to the number of his Khalsa.¹⁴ Nowhere did he act or behave in manner incompatible with his faith, teachings, or his own past. It was during these wandering that the whole of the Adi Guru Granth Sahib was dictated and other works were composed by the Guru at Damdama Sahib, which became the Benares of the Sikhs¹⁵ that the Epistle of Victory was written to Aurangzeb, that Anandpur was reproduced in the Lakhi Jungle, at Damdama Sahib, and at Abchalnagar, that millions were baptized, that Banda was selected and deputed to the Punjab, and that the glorious words of consolation and courage were addressed by him to his wife regarding the death of his sons. All this could not be the doings of a man who, bereft of his reason, went wandering about 'in the most deplorable condition'. It should also be remembered that these 'wanderings' extended over only two years and seven or eight months. This does not seem to be the sense of Malcolm's considerable time.

To sum up, we may say that the Guru proceeded southwards of his own free will and choice. He joined the company of Bahadur Shah on the latter's invitation and did join as a companion and not as a servant. The service theory has lack of proper grasp of the subject. When we remember that he still had in the Punjab, devoted disciples and hosts, who had importuned him, again and again, to stay on with them as their Lord, and that, if he had so wished, he could have passed the rest of his life in the Punjab in perfect peace and safety. He had, all through his career, defended the weak against the strong and had sacrificed his all for the sake of his ideals. We should also remember that fighting for its own sake did not possess any attraction for him. By nature, he was far more inclined towards a life of peace and peaceful activity. All his wars were forced on him by those who opposed his campaign for the establishment of an era of justice and equality in social, political, and economic spheres. The fact that the Guru accompanied the Bahadur Shah towards Deccan was to press the latter to fulfill his promise to do justice.

Bahadur Shah was no doubt favourably disposed towards the Guru, but still he was a son of his father and a follower of the Prophet. He could not have altogether reversed the policy of his father which had also been the general policy of his past Muhammadan kings. Having no personal enmity with any man such, the Guru found nothing low or wrong in meeting and trying to persuade the emperor to assume milder ways. But the emperor had his own motives in securing the Guru's company. Firstly he feared that taking avengement of his absence from Delhi, the Guru might gather his forces and start a war in order to avenge his great wrongs. Secondly, he knew the Guru's ability as general and leader. He desires to use him in curbing the Marathas. He was obviously

13. J.D. Cunningham, op. cit., p.79

14. M.A. Macauliffe, *Sikh History*, Volume III (Pbi. Translation), Jalandhar, 2002, pp.541-542

15. Teja Singh, Ganda Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, Volume I, Patiala, 1999, p.75; S.M. Latif, *History of Punjab* (III edition), Ludhiana, 2000, p.261

dodging the Guru because he knew that if he decided to call and had over the Governor of Sirhind or Raja Bhim Chand to the Guru, the latter would return to the Punjab. He was also afraid of the reaction of bigoted *maulvis* against such a decision, particularly when he was yet a new occupant of the royal throne. The Guru knew the emperor's mind and, therefore, felt disinclined to go any further with him.

References:

1. H.R. Gupta, *History of the Sikh Gurus*, 1973, New Delhi, p.226
2. H.R. Gupta, op. cit., 229
3. Ibid
4. J.D. Cunningham, *History of the Sikhs*, Delhi, 2002 (reprint), p.79
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