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THE EARLY LIFE AND RISE OF BABA BANDA SINGH BAHADUR: FROM ASCETICISM TO SIKH REVOLUTIONARY LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Baba Banda Singh Bahadur (1670–1716), originally named Lachhman Dev, was a transformative figure in Sikh history, renowned for leading the first Sikh rebellion against Mughal authority and establishing a short-lived Sikh state in Punjab and parts of Haryana between 1709 and 1716. His early life, marked by spiritual exploration, asceticism, and martial training, shaped his evolution from a Rajput youth to a revered Sikh warrior. Born into a martial family in Jammu, Lachhman Dev's journey through asceticism and disillusionment with worldly power prepared him for his eventual role as Guru Gobind Singh's appointed general, laying the foundation for Sikh political and military ascendancy. This paper explores his childhood in Rajori, the pivotal hunting incident that led to his renunciation, his years as a Vaishnavite ascetic under the name Madho Das, and his conversion to Sikhism in 1708, culminating in his leadership following Guru Gobind Singh's martyrdom. It highlights how these experiences, amid Mughal tyranny, fueled the Sikh rebellion and social reforms, marking a shift toward Sikh sovereignty.

Keywords: Baba Banda Singh Bahadur, Lachhman Dev, Sikh history, Mughal rebellion, Guru Gobind Singh, Khalsa, asceticism, Rajput warrior, Punjab sovereignty, Haryana, Sirhind conquest, spiritual transformation, martial training, Wazir Khan, Sikh martyrdom

Introduction

Baba Banda Singh Bahadur (1670–1716), originally named Lachhman Dev, was a transformative figure in Sikh history, renowned for leading the first Sikh rebellion against Mughal authority and establishing a short-lived Sikh state in Punjab and parts of Haryana between 1709 and 1716. His early life, marked by spiritual exploration, asceticism, and martial training,

shaped his evolution from a Rajput youth to a revered Sikh warrior. Born into a martial family in Jammu, Lachhman Dev's journey through asceticism and disillusionment with worldly power prepared him for his eventual role as Guru Gobind Singh's appointed general, laying the foundation for Sikh political and military ascendancy.

Baba Banda Singh Bahadur was born on October 27, 1670, in Rajori, a town in the Jammu region of present-day Jammu and Kashmir, India. His birth name was Lachhman Dev (also recorded as Lachhman Das in some sources). He belonged to the Minhas clan of the Rajputs, a martial community known for their warrior traditions in the hilly regions of northern India. His father, Ram Dev, was a farmer and possibly a small landowner, engaged in agriculture and local militia activities, typical of Rajput families in the region. The some historians does not specify his mother's name, but Sikh chronicles, such as *Sri Gur Panth Prakash* by Rattan Singh Bhangu, describe his family as modestly prosperous, living in a rugged, semi-independent area under nominal Mughal control.

Rajori, situated in the Pir Panjal range, was a frontier region with a mix of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh influences. The area was governed by local chieftains who often resisted Mughal authority, fostering a culture of martial pride and autonomy. This environment shaped Lachhman Dev's early exposure to warfare, community defense, and regional resistance, which later aligned with Sikh ideals of sovereignty.

Lachhman Dev's childhood was typical of a Rajput boy in a martial family. He was raised with an emphasis on physical prowess, horsemanship, and weapon handling, essential skills for a warrior caste. Sikh historian Ganda Singh notes, "Lachhman Dev was trained in the martial traditions of his Rajput clan, including swordsmanship and archery, from a young age." His education likely included basic literacy in Devanagari or Persian, the administrative languages of the time, though no formal schooling is documented.

The rugged terrain of Rajori and its proximity to conflict zones meant that Lachhman Dev grew up witnessing skirmishes between local chieftains and Mughal forces. These experiences instilled a sense of independence and defiance, which later resonated with the Sikh struggle against Mughal oppression. Additionally, the region's syncretic culture exposed him to Hindu devotional practices, Sufi mysticism, and emerging Sikh teachings, planting the seeds for his spiritual inclinations.

A defining moment in Lachhman Dev's early life occurred around the age of 15, in 1685, when he experienced a profound moral crisis during a hunting expedition. According to *Panth Prakash* and other Sikh chronicles, Lachhman Dev killed a pregnant doe, and the sight of the dying animal and its unborn fawns deeply affected him. Overwhelmed by guilt and disillusioned with the violence inherent in his martial lifestyle, he renounced worldly life and turned to asceticism.[1] Khushwant Singh writes, "The hunting incident was a turning point, leading Lachhman Dev to abandon his Rajput warrior path for a life of spiritual seeking." This incident reflects the broader influence of India's spiritual traditions, including Jainism's emphasis on *ahimsa* (non-violence) and the Bhakti movement's focus on compassion. Lachhman Dev left home, adopting the life of a wandering ascetic (*sadhu*), and sought guidance

from various spiritual masters, a common practice among seekers in 17th-century India.

After renouncing his Rajput identity, Lachhman Dev took the name firstly narain das[2] then Madho Das and became a *bairagi* (Vaishnavite ascetic) under the tutelage of a Hindu guru, possibly Ram Das or Janaki Das, in the Panchvati forest near Nasik, Maharashtra.[3] The *bairagi* sect, part of the Ramanandi tradition, emphasized devotion to Lord Rama, ascetic discipline, and detachment from worldly desires. Madho Das immersed himself in yogic practices, meditation, and the study of Hindu scriptures, such as the *Ramayana* and *Bhagavad Gita*. Ganda Singh notes, "Madho Das excelled in ascetic disciplines, gaining a reputation for spiritual powers (*siddhis*) and attracting disciples."

Around the early 1690s, Madho Das established an *ashram* (hermitage) at Nanded, on the banks of the Godavari River in present-day Maharashtra. His *ashram* became a center for spiritual seekers, and he adopted the title of *Jogi* (yogi), reflecting his mastery of yogic practices. Sikh chronicles describe him as a charismatic figure, skilled in debate and reputed to possess mystical abilities, though some accounts, like those by Mughal chronicler Khafi Khan, exaggerate his reputation as a sorcerer to discredit his later military campaigns.

Despite his spiritual pursuits, Madho Das retained elements of his martial upbringing. He trained his disciples in self-defense and maintained a small band of armed followers, a common practice among *bairagi* leaders in turbulent regions. This blend of spirituality and martial readiness foreshadowed his transformation into a Sikh warrior. He indirectly supports this duality, noting his later military leadership under Guru Gobind Singh, which required both strategic acumen and spiritual conviction.[4]

By the late 1690s, Madho Das grew disillusioned with the *bairagi* lifestyle. Sikh historian Hari Ram Gupta suggests, "Madho Das found the ascetic life lacking in social purpose, as it focused on personal salvation rather than addressing societal oppression." The Mughal Empire's increasing tyranny under Aurangzeb (1658–1707), including forced conversions and heavy taxation, likely influenced his discontent. Living in Nanded, a region with a growing Sikh presence due to Guru Gobind Singh's travels, Madho Das encountered Sikh teachings, which emphasized equality, resistance to injustice, and collective action.

Madho Das's *ashram* attracted diverse visitors, including Sikh traders and devotees, who shared stories of Guru Gobind Singh's Khalsa and its defiance of Mughal authority. These interactions piqued his interest in Sikhism, though he remained an independent ascetic until 1708. His reputation as a spiritual leader and his martial background made him a potential ally for the Sikh cause, setting the stage for his transformative meeting with the Guru.

Sikh chronicles describe Madho Das as a tall, robust man with a commanding presence, reflecting his Rajput heritage and ascetic discipline. His years of yogic practice gave him physical endurance and mental focus, qualities that later defined his military leadership. He was known for his fiery temperament, as evidenced by his initial arrogance when meeting Guru Gobind Singh, recounted in *Panth Prakash*: "Madho Das boasted of his spiritual powers, challenging the Guru, only to be humbled by his divine aura." This incident

highlights his complex personality—confident, introspective, and open to transformation.

Madho Das's early life culminated in his meeting with Guru Gobind Singh in September 1708 at Nanded. The Guru, seeking a leader to continue the Sikh struggle after his own martyrdom, visited Madho Das's *ashram*. Impressed by the Guru's vision and the Khalsa's mission, Madho Das converted to Sikhism, receiving *Amrit* (initiation) and the name Banda Singh Bahadur. The Guru appointed him as the military commander of the Khalsa, tasking him with liberating Punjab from Mughal oppression. This marked the end of his early life as an ascetic and the beginning of his role as a revolutionary leader.

The martyrdom of Guru Gobind Singh on October 7, 1708, in Nanded, sent shockwaves through the Sikh community, igniting a fire of outrage and vengeance. This was not the first time Sikhs had endured such loss; the Mughals had executed their fifth Guru, Arjun Dev, in 1606 for supporting Prince Khusrau, and their ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, in 1675 for defending Kashmiri Pandits against forced conversions. These acts of Mughal aggression had forged a deep-seated resolve among Sikhs to resist tyranny. For a brief period under Emperor Bahadur Shah I, who ascended the throne in 1707, Sikh-Mughal relations showed signs of improvement, as the Guru aided the Emperor in the succession war against his brother Muhammad Azam. However, the Guru's assassination, orchestrated by Wazir Khan, the Mughal governor of Sirhind, through a Pathan assassin named Jamshed Khan, shattered this fragile truce. The Sikh community, fueled by grief and betrayal, rallied under the leadership of Baba Banda Singh Bahadur, embarking on a fierce rebellion that marked the transition of Sikhism from a religious movement to a political and military power.

The assassination of Guru Gobind Singh was a calculated move by Wazir Khan, who feared the growing influence of the Khalsa, established by the Guru in 1699 to unite Sikhs as a martial brotherhood. The Pathan's attack, described in Mughal records like *Akhbar-i-Darbar-i-Mualla*, occurred on September 20, 1708, while the Guru rested in his tent. Despite initial recovery attempts by Bahadur Shah's surgeons, the Guru succumbed to his wounds, leaving a legacy of resistance and a clear directive for vengeance. The Sikh community, already hardened by decades of persecution, saw this as a call to arms, with villages across Punjab and Haryana buzzing with tales of Wazir Khan's treachery, particularly his role in the 1704 execution of the Guru's young sons, Sahibzadas Zorawar Singh and Fateh Singh, in Sirhind's cold dungeon.

Before his death, Guru Gobind Singh appointed Baba Banda Singh Bahadur, formerly Madho Das Bairagi, as the commander of the Khalsa.[5] Born Lachhman Dev in 1670 in Rajori, Jammu, Banda had lived as a Rajput warrior, then an ascetic, before embracing Sikhism in 1708 after meeting the Guru in Nanded. The Guru's final command was unequivocal: liberate Punjab from Mughal oppression and avenge the atrocities committed against Sikhs. Banda, armed with the Guru's *hukamnamas* (edicts) and the spiritual authority of the Khalsa, set out for Punjab in late 1708, carrying the weight of the Guru's legacy. His journey from Nanded to Punjab was marked by growing support, as Sikhs and oppressed peasants recognized him as

the Guru's deputy. His reputation for compassion and justice preceded him, with villagers recounting how he blessed the childless with sons and the needy with cattle, earning him a saintly aura.[6]

In *Sri Gur Panth Prakash*, Gyani Gyan Singh records Banda's mission as a divine mandate: "The Guru sent me, his slave, to wreak vengeance on the Turks, to destroy Wazir Khan's household, plunder Sirhind, avenge the Guru's sons, and crush the hill chieftains."[7] This resolve resonated with Sikhs, who saw Banda as a liberator destined to fulfill the Guru's vision. As he traveled through Malwa and Haryana, Banda issued *hukamnamas* invoking Guru Gobind Singh's authority, calling Sikhs to join the Khalsa and fight for justice. Villages in Ambala, Kurukshetra, and Hisar, long burdened by Mughal taxation and local banditry, responded eagerly, swelling his ranks with Jat peasants and artisans. Rattan Singh Bhangu describes Banda's appeal: "Those in pain found relief through his prayers; those seeking prosperity received his blessings."[8] His charisma and martial prowess transformed him into a folk hero, a deputy of the Guru who promised deliverance from oppression.[9]

The political landscape of 1708 favored Banda's rebellion. The death of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707 had weakened the empire, leaving Bahadur Shah I grappling with internal strife and regional revolts. The Emperor's brother, Kambaksh, rebelled in the Deccan, while Rajputs in Rajasthan challenged Mughal authority, diverting imperial resources.[10] In Punjab, Mughal governors like Wazir Khan ruled with an iron fist, alienating peasants and fueling anti-Mughal sentiment. This power vacuum provided Banda an opportunity to mobilize Sikhs and local communities, particularly in Haryana and Malwa, where Jat and Sikh populations were strong. The decline of Mughal authority, coupled with the Guru's martyrdom, created a perfect storm for Sikh resurgence, with Banda emerging as the spearhead of a nascent political power.

Banda Singh Bahadur's early actions focused on addressing local grievances, building trust among villagers. In Haryana's rural areas, banditry had driven many from their homes, leaving fields untended and communities desolate. Villagers appealed to Banda for protection, and his Sikh forces confronted robbers, restoring safety and enabling resettlement. Sohan Singh Sheetal writes, "Villagers returned to their homes, praising the Sikhs' bravery and Banda's leadership." These acts of service cemented Banda's reputation as a protector, drawing more recruits and resources. News of his kindness spread, attracting men, money, and supplies from Punjab, Haryana, and Malwa. Encouraged by this support, Banda declared a bold promise: "Anyone threatened by thieves, dacoits, or oppressed by cruelty will find refuge with the Khalsa."[11] This commitment to justice aligned with Sikh ideals of *seva* (selfless service) and *sangat* (community), resonating with rural communities long exploited by Mughal officials and local elites.

Banda's vision extended beyond protection to systemic change. Kartar Singh and Gurdial Singh record his proclamation: "I will defend the weak and impoverished against all thieves and government oppressors, ensuring peace, security, and harmony." He sought no personal gain, asking only for voluntary contributions to sustain the Khalsa's mission. This selfless approach, rooted in

Guru Nanak's principle of *vand chakna* (sharing), won hearts across Punjab and Haryana.[12] Banda also invited people to join the Khalsa, promising a share of conquered territories to those who embraced its discipline. His call met with overwhelming response, as Jats, artisans, and even some Muslims, inspired by the Khalsa's egalitarianism, swelled his ranks. The promise of land ownership, a radical departure from Mughal feudalism, appealed to peasants who had endured centuries of landlordism.

Banda's leadership style blended spiritual authority with military pragmatism. He organized his forces into disciplined units, leveraging the Khalsa's martial training and the Jat peasantry's warrior traditions. His *hukamnamas* invoked Guru Gobind Singh's name, ensuring loyalty and unity among Sikhs. By 1709, Banda had established a base in the Shivalik hills, near Mukhlispur (later Lohgarh), preparing for his campaign against Mughal strongholds. His growing popularity alarmed Wazir Khan, who saw the Sikh rebellion as a direct threat to Mughal control in Punjab. The stage was set for Banda's historic campaigns, which would culminate in the capture of Sirhind in 1710, the establishment of a Sikh proto-state, and the minting of coins in the Guru's name, marking a bold assertion of Sikh sovereignty.

Conclusion

The Sikh rebellion under Banda Singh Bahadur was more than a military uprising; it was a social revolution. By protecting villages, redistributing land, and challenging Mughal tyranny, Banda embodied the Khalsa's mission to uphold justice and equality. His leadership galvanized Punjab and Haryana, transforming the Sikh community into a political force capable of reshaping the region's socio-political landscape. The outrage over Guru Gobind Singh's death, fueled by decades of Mughal persecution, found expression in Banda's campaigns, which laid the foundation for the Sikh Misls and the eventual Sikh Empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Baba Banda Singh Bahadur's journey from Rajput warrior and ascetic Madho Das to Sikh revolutionary epitomizes personal transformation driving historical change. His early life in Rajori, marked by martial training and spiritual crisis, prepared him for leadership under Guru Gobind Singh in 1708. Following the Guru's martyrdom, Banda led a rebellion that avenged Sikh losses, redistributed land, and established a proto-state in Punjab and Haryana from 1709–1716, embodying Khalsa ideals of justice and equality. Though executed in 1716, his legacy paved the way for Sikh sovereignty, inspiring future generations and highlighting the fusion of spirituality and resistance against oppression. Further studies could compare his uprising with contemporaneous revolts for deeper insights into Sikh history.

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