NATHA SINGH SHAHEED: LIFE AND WORKS - A CASE STUDY IN LOCAL HISTORY AMRITSAR

Mndanjit Kaur
NATHA SINGH SHAHEED: LIFE AND WORKS

A case study in local history Amritsar

Madanjit Kaur

Natha Singh Mahal (gotra), son of Sewa Singh belonged to village Kale (Distt. Amritsar). His father, Sewa Singh was a devout Sikh and was connected with the Khalsa confederacy. Natha Singh was an intelligent youth and a brave soldier. He received pahul (baptism) along with his brother Dayal Singh from Baba Deep Singh Shaheed, the famous Sikh martyr and the founder of Shaheed Misal. Natha Singh joined the Shaheed Misal and took part in many of its expeditions. For his acts of bravery and zeal for righteousness, he earned the title of "Shaheed" from Baba Deep Singh.2

Natha Singh Shaheed soon earned popularity among the Sikh ranks for his acts of chivalry and courage. He was ever ready to take part in Dharamyudh (war for a righteous cause). He extended his services to Jhanda Singh Bhangi who was leading the Khalsa Panth in Majha region. Natha Singh took part in almost all the expeditions of the Bhangi Sardar. During the conquest of Jammu, Natha Singh also got a large share in the spoils of War (1816 Sammat, AD 1759). With this money, Natha Singh recruited five hundred soldiers and five hundred horsemen in his personal contingent.3 With his personal troops Natha Singh fought against the Afghan invaders and uprooted them from their strongholds in the Majha region. The Afghans were followed up to Rohtas. The Khalsa captured the rest of the territory under Afghan hold and distributed it among themselves. Natha Singh and his brother Dayal Singh contributed a lot towards this victory. They were given occupation of territory yielding one lakh revenue.4

At this time, the Afghan officer of Sialkot, Nawab Zyafat Khan was inflicting severe losses on the Hindus. The rayat was hard pressed by his atrocities. Natha Singh and Dayal Singh on hearing these complaints decided to take stern action against the Afghan Nawab. They were successful in this task. Their action provided a great relief to the people.

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 2562.
4. Ibid.
Natha Singh was very much concerned with the welfare of the poor, needy and the common masses. He would look into public matters himself in his illaqa. He himself dispensed justice, heard problems of the people and provided needful facilities and help to the peasants. He would punish the tyrant and evil doers. He allotted jagirs and land to the tillers. Natha Singh, thus introduced great social reforms to bring a change in the feudal society. He became a popular leader in the area. He was considered saviour of the oppressed and the downtrodden.5

He made Sialkot his headquarters and settled at the spot associated with the visit of Guru Nanak in this area. This dera was known as Babe Ki Ber. Natha Singh developed this dera into a big centre of Sikh pilgrimage. Natha Singh was a man of saintly disposition, a completely detached person but fully conscious of his social and moral obligations. He would distribute all his money to the poor and of needy. He would prefer the company of saints and religious persons and spent most of his time in religious discourses. Even the income from his personal jagir was spent in charity. He ran a big langar where food was provided to all and no discrimination was made between Hindus and the Muslims. All were fed adequately.6

Natha Singh was a scholar and a learned man. He had considerably good knowledge of Sikh scriptures. He would spend greater part of his time in reading Gurbani and performing nam simran. Yet he would be ever ready to offer his services to the cause of the Khalsa Panth. Whenever, an occasion of battle occurred, Natha Singh would readily come forward to extend his support to the Sikh brotherhood. His commitment to the cause of righteousness was well known. He had also done a lot of altruistic service for the welfare of humanity. He took part in a number of battles against the Afghans and protected the freedom of the Sikhs.

In AD 1761 Ahmad Shah Abdali invaded Punjab with the sole object of liquidating the whole Sikh community. The Sikhs suffered greatly in the battle at Kup Harira near Barnala (Feb., 1762). This saw a great carnage (Wada Ghallughara) of the Sikhs. Amritsar was also besieged by the Afghans. The city was devastated, the tank was desecrated and the Harmandar was demolished. Natha Singh and his brother Dayal Singh made every effort to encourage the Sikhs to come out of despair and gloom and take revenge for the humiliation inflicted by the enemy on the Sikhs. Their appeal motivated the Sikhs for immediate action against the enemy. Natha Singh collected a force of 4000 horsemen and followed the Afghans on their retreat to Kabul. The Afghan ruler had reached Kabul but his rear camp was crossing the river Chenab, along with thousands of Hindu slaves taken away as prisoners of war. The Sikhs under the command of Natha Singh swiftly took the lead, came forward and blew out the bridge. The enemy was taken aback, great panic struck the Afghan army and they escaped hurriedly leaving behind the prisoners and a large quantity of arms and ammunition. The Sikhs freed the Hindu prisoners. A large number of good horses of the enemy were also taken away by the Sikhs.7 They inflicted tremendous loss to the enemy. This was a great success of Natha Singh.

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 2563.
7. Ibid., p. 2565.
After returning to Sialkot, he distributed money among the Hindu captives and sent them home as free men. The Hindus felt highly obliged to Natha Singh and his fellow Sikh soldiers, who had saved their lives, honour and religion. Natha Singh considered this act as no obligation but simply performance of the task for which the Khalsa of the Guru had been created.

In samvat 1819 (AD 1763), Natha Singh could avenge the demolition of the Harmandir. Both the brothers collected a large Sikh contingent at Amritsar and attacked the Afghan troops posted there. They made the enemy to cleanse the tank, they desecrated earlier. Natha Singh and his brother led expeditions against the local touts and the Mughal officials who had helped the Afghans against the Sikhs. They got the news of Jhan Khan's march against them. They moved out of Amritsar, rushed to Sialkot and defeated the Afghans (AD 1764). It was a fierce battle and Natha Singh showed commendable acts of bravery. Again in 1832 Samvat (AD 1775) during the invasion of Prince Taimur Shah, Natha Singh and Dayal Singh took the lead and motivated the Sikhs to get together and face boldly the Afghan menace collectively. Natha Singh collected arms and ammunition. A task force of 4000 horsemen was ever ready under his command to face the enemy. He also encouraged the local Hindus to come forward to strengthen their Sikh brethrens against the common enemy, i.e. the Afghan invaders who looted their herth and homes and got away with their men and women as prisoners and had hurt their religious sentiments by killing cows. Natha Singh played the role of a common leader and encouraged both the communities to integrate and face the common enemy at a common platform. He made people to realize their problem of defence and unite together for the national cause. In order to bring awareness among the people and make them ready for a demanding action he would hold daily diwans where dhadis would sing vars to motivate people to brave actions. Meanwhile, the Afghan invader Taimur Shah had reached Lahore. Natha Singh came out to face the Afghan commander, Buland Khan, who was out to attack Wazirabad with a strong army of 20,000 troops. Sikhs under the command of Natha Singh confronted the enemy boldly. The battle took place on the bank of river Chenab to the South of Sialkot. Sikhs came out victorious. They devastated the Afghan strongholds and collected revenue from all the territories under the Afghan tutelage. In this battle Dayal Singh was badly injured. He was brought back to the Dera at Sialkot. His wounds were attended but he could not survive. He was cremated near the Gurdwara Babe Ki Ber. A dehura stands at the site of his cremation.

Estimate

Natha Singh was a great saint and a brave soldier. His life was dedicated to the
cause of Khalsa. His services in the socio-religious sphere and the battle-field are commendable. Although a man of great merit and high attainments, he remained a detached person. He did not marry and remained a celibate. He spent all his time and resources in the service of God and the welfare of humanity. He distributed his money to the poor and needy and never kept any thing in his personal possession. He was a man of simple habits. He was a vegetarian. His diet was simple and meagre. He would dress up only in course white robes. He led an austere and saintly life. He would sleep on the floor. His daily routine was in consonance with the mode of Sikh raiti maryada. Most of the time he was busy with religious affairs. His centre was a shelter for the poor and saints. He extended his patronage to scholars and theologians engaged in writing Sikh scriptures. He encouraged them to prepare birs (copies) of Guru Granth Sahib. It was his earnest desire to place Guru Granth Sahib in various Gurdwaras particularly in the rural areas so that the service of reading scripture could be followed there regularly. With his encouragement and benevolence a large number of Sikh scholars and scribes settled down in his dera and they produced significant works. These scholars were paid handsomely for their services. Natha Singh Shadeed contributed a lot in establishing Sikh centres at various places. He built dharamsalas and gurdwaras in all the villages conquered by him. He provided sufficient financial aid to these centres. Cash allowance and jagirs were given to them. The birs of Guru Granth Sahib were placed here and regular worship and religious service according to Sikh rites was performed.

Natha Singh was a man of virtuous deeds, a tyagi, Brahamgyani and a truth loving person. His life was dedicated to the cause of righteousness. He did a lot of humanitarian service in this region. His attitude in worldly life was completely secular. He would equally extend help to the Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims who approached him for support. He was a highly respected man in his area. His advice was sought after by the local people. In matters of disputes and quarrels, he was called upon to settle the issue. He introduced perfect justice in his area. He was held in high esteem by the common masses and the ruling class. Maharaja Ranjit Singh had great respect for Natha Singh. Rest of the Sikh sardars respected him equally. That is why his villages were never annexed by any of the misal sardars even after the demarcation of territories among the misals. Natha Singh had been glorified by his contemporaries and near contemporaries. Maharaja Ranjit Singh regarded him as the greatest saint of his times, his courtiers also testified his opinion.

Towards the end of his life (date of death not given), Natha Singh donated all his property to various Sikh centres. Some of the property was attached to Akal Takhat Sahib and some to Darbar Sahib as jagir. A number of villages were

13. Ibid., p. 2596.
15. Ibid., p. 2598.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
granted to Nirmala Saint, Ran Singh, who lived near Amritsar. The rest of his villages were given over for the maintenance of Gurdwara Babe Ki Ber, Sialkot. This *jagir* comprised of Rs. 8,000. The building of the Gurdwara was built by him. The Gurdwara complex of Babe Ki Ber, Sialkot has a tank and a garden. A big well with a pair of Persian wheels was also constructed near the *dera* by Natha Singh. This well provided a lot of water facility to irrigate the nearby agriculture land. This was a great contribution of Natha Singh Shaheed. Natha Singh breathed his last in his *dera* at Sialkot. At the time of his death Natha Singh nominated Nihal Singh (Ramgharia) as Mahant of his *dera*. The *dehura* of Natha Singh Shaheed is built near the Gurdwara. It was visited by members of all the communities and was held in great respect by the local people. During the British period a major portion of the *jagir* of the centre of Natha Singh Shaheed was confiscated by the Government. However, the Sikh devotees gave large endowments to this centre in recognition of the humanitarian services offered by the *dera*. The next head of the centre, Mahant Prem Singh made various new additions to the Gurdwara. He built a pacca tank there, some houses were also built and the *langar* building was extended. Consequently, this Gurdwara became a famous centre for pilgrimage.

The *dera* of Shaheed Natha Singh was a famous centre of Sikh scholarship. A number of Sikh scholars resided here. It became a popular centre of religious discourses. Gian Singh Giani, the famous Sikh historian of the late nineteenth century composed his work *Tawarikh Guru Khalsa* in the Gurdwara Babe Ki Ber, Sialkot during the time of Mahant Prem Singh.