

The biggest rogue to rule Lahore

Lahore. Dawn. 27.4.02

THE Walled City of Lahore has seen many a tyrant, many a crazed woman, and even a eunuch who ruled over it. Despots down to their bones, all of them. The Tartars also came, many a time, raped, pillaged and burned down the place. The city would just pick up the pieces and move on. What else could they do ... that is till Sikha Gakkhar hit them.

During the reign of the emperor Muhammad Shah, a Tughlaq, a governor, or a Subedar as he was called then, governed Lahore from Delhi. Being removed from the centre of power and on the main route between the capital and Kabul, from where all the invaders normally used to come, its strategic importance lay in it being the last major military stop before anyone actually got to Delhi, to claim the throne of the sub-continent. To add to this military dimension was its economic importance, for it had, and still has, the largest and most important grain and goods market in the region. It was also a seat of learning. All these attractions proved enough for many an emperor, invader or pretender, who reached the conclusion that Lahore was a much more lucrative proposition than Delhi, for here the maidens were fairer and the music sweeter, not to talk of other matters. This combination proved for Sikha Gakkhar a fatal attraction.

The Gakkhar tribe dwells just below the foothills of the mountains in the north, and its main market town is even today called Gakkhar Mandi, near Sialkot. The Gakkhar tribe lives in this area and spreads right into the hills towards Hazara. From the foothills rose a man, tall, handsome, exceptionally brave and wild, who led an army of over a thousand, all mounted on horses whose sole objective was to loot and pillage and return to their lands with wealth and riches. Speed and force was their strategic advantage over the entrenched. Their forefathers had for centuries watched invaders come and go, and to them the way the Afghans had survived was to loot the sub-continent and take everything home. The rise of the Sikhs much later was also a result of Sikha Gakkhar's experiences, a Robin Hood of his day, who robbed the robbers from Afghanistan. Sikha Gakkhar visited Lahore many times and was convinced that the city could be taken and ruled. So he hit on a strategy, and that was to come in reasonable numbers, with overwhelming force, sit on the throne for a reasonable time, collect everything of value that could be carried

away, and then make for the hills before the official army came.

Sikha Gakkhar came for the first time with his army from Hazara, where he had trained his men away from spies operating on the plains. He reached Lahore within a matter of three weeks, looting and pillaging almost every village and town on the way. He moved with such speed that his agents were posted along the main highways a week before the invasion, murdering anyone remotely looking like a spy or an agent of the crown. He entered Lahore for the first time in AH 795, killing the entire defending force and executing every official he could. Their heads were put on lances and displayed in the city streets to drive fear into the hearts of the people. His forces entered each and every house of the city, taking away everything of value, and if fancy caught them, any woman they thought was worth keeping.

Sikha Gakkhar and his men had a ball, for never in their lives had these peasants seen such splendour. Any person who complained of being mistreated was executed on the spot. Within two weeks of his taking Lahore, he had carted away over half the grain and spices in the markets to his hideouts in the hills of the Gakkhars. The emperor heard of the fall of Lahore and immediately dispatched a force under his son Prince Humayun to retake the city. But then as fate would have it, the emperor died even before the expeditionary force could enter the Punjab from Delhi, and the army was halted till a successor took the throne. This gave Sikha Gakkhar ideas of grandeur, for by then a small bureaucracy of locals had quickly risen to fill in the gap left by the initial killings.

In the streets of Lahore a saying arose: "Forget your mothers and your daughters, hide your bread for Sikha is here." Even to this day many old folk in the city use this to describe the doings of a government. The new Emperor Sultan Mahmood Shah ascended the throne in AH 796 and he ordered an even bigger army to retake Lahore. Sikha Gakkhar grouped his forces to the east of the city, just near where today lies the area of Garhi Shahu. It was an intense battle and Sikha, very wisely, decided to retreat against a massive conventional force. He had already prepared his exit plan with his wealth and women, and as soon as night fell his forces, disappeared towards the Jammu hills, crossing the River Ravi to trick the opposing army. Their speed and tactics made sure the

Tughlaq forces would never be able to catch up with them.

In the hills of Jammu and Hazara, the now experienced Sikha Gakkhar regrouped and increased his army from his native lands stretching from Gujranwala right up to Hazara and Jammu. It was during his brief rule of Lahore that Gakkhar Mandi became a major grain market, and does remain so to this day. It is also because of Sikha Gakkhar that a few centuries later from Gujranwala, very near where Sikha lived, rose a Sikh leader who was to gel together a force to rule not only Lahore, but the whole of the Punjab. The bureaucrats who had helped Sikha were punished, but not executed, and they remained in the city with their wealth and influence. They switched sides with ease.

It so happened that during this period Amir Taimur had moved towards Delhi from the north to challenge the emperor, while his son, Prince Pir Muhammad, in a flanking movement had taken Multan after a stiff fight. A major change was in the offing in the sub-continent. As these huge armies prepared to do battle, Sikha Gakkhar got a signal from his bureaucrats and he moved in with lightening speed. He took Lahore within a matter of a few hours with a guile that left everyone dazed. Tyranny had returned with a vengeance, to Lahore and to Delhi, for there the forces of Taimur had secured themselves.

On his way to Kashmir, Taimur was informed of the ways of Sikha Gakkhar, and he did not respond for a whole day. The mighty Taimur, a warrior known for his ruthless streak being a successor of Genghis Khan, was stunned by the tactics of this man. He called his council and discussed Sikha Gakkhar in detail and decided that a swift army of 10,000 of the fiercest horsemen ride out and surround Lahore. The order was that not one Gakkhar should leave the city alive. Sikha Gakkhar was trapped. A fierce fight took place in which the Gakkhars managed to defend themselves with honour. But Sikha had not accounted for the people of Lahore. As battle raged, the entire population attacked the Gakkhars, killing Sikha with his favourite women and each and every Gakkhar. The rule of the wild man from the hills collapsed from within. But this is what happens when the rulers misread the people, or take their silence as a sign of weakness ... and so it happened with Sikha Gakkhar. —

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