

Humanity above Hierarchy: Banda Singh Bahadur's Vision of Egalitarian Society in Early Modern Era

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Abstract

The early eighteenth century marked a decisive moment in North Indian history when entrenched structures of caste hierarchy, religious exclusion, and agrarian exploitation came under sustained challenge. This paper examines the egalitarian movement led by Banda Singh Bahadur as a transformative phase in Sikh and Indian history, situating it within the broader crisis of Mughal authority after 1707. Drawing upon contemporary Persian chronicles, Sikh narratives, and modern historiography, the study argues that Banda Singh Bahadur's leadership represented not merely a political rebellion but a conscious project of social reconstruction. By dismantling caste distinctions, appointing individuals from marginalised communities to positions of authority, and extending equal status to Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims, the Khalsa regime sought to reconfigure the moral foundations of governance. Equally significant were Banda Singh Bahadur's agrarian reforms, which transferred land rights from absentee zamindars to cultivating peasants and reduced the revenue burden, thereby undermining feudal domination. The movement's commitment to religious tolerance, evidenced by the protection of Muslim religious practices and participation of Muslims in the Sikh army and administration, challenges colonial and Mughal portrayals of the uprising as sectarian violence. This paper contends that the egalitarian experiment under Banda Singh Bahadur constituted one of the earliest attempts in India to align political power with social justice and popular welfare. Though short-lived, the movement left a lasting imprint on the political imagination of the region by demonstrating the possibility of a humane, inclusive, and people-centred order.

Keywords

Banda Singh Bahadur; Sikh egalitarianism; caste and social equality; agrarian reforms; religious tolerance

Introduction

The first decade of the eighteenth century in northern India witnessed the consolidation of an exclusionary and exploitative socio-political order under the later Mughal regime. Governance during this period was characterised by entrenched inequalities, religious discrimination, and a rigidly hierarchical social structure that systematically marginalised peasants, artisans, and lower-caste groups. Political power, landownership, and administrative authority remained concentrated in the hands of imperial officials, zamindars, and hereditary elites, while the vast majority of the population endured economic exploitation and social subordination (Alam, 1986).

Against this backdrop, the emergence of Banda Singh Bahadur as the leader of the Khalsa marked a decisive rupture in the prevailing order. Following the conquest of Sirhind in 1710, Banda Singh Bahadur established what may legitimately be described as the **first Sikh state**, founded upon the egalitarian principles articulated in the Sikh tradition and institutionalised by Guru Gobind Singh. This state consciously rejected caste hierarchy, religious exclusion, and feudal privilege, extending political and social rights to communities that had historically been denied both representation and dignity (Surendra Singh, 2010).

As Surendra Singh observes, *“The Sikh revolution was not only an egalitarian social revolution, but also a mass movement against Mughal domination in religious and political terms, challenging the moral and social orthodoxies of Indian society”* (Surendra Singh, 2010, p. 312). Banda Singh Bahadur’s leadership thus transformed the Khalsa from a persecuted religious community into a revolutionary force seeking structural change rather than mere political substitution.

Comparative Structure of Governance: Mughal State vs. Banda Singh Bahadur’s Administration

Dimension	Mughal Imperial Governance	Sikh Governance under Banda Singh Bahadur
Source of authority	Imperial sovereignty and dynastic legitimacy	Ethical authority rooted in Khalsa ideals
Social hierarchy	Rigid, caste- and status-based	Egalitarian, caste distinctions dismantled
Land ownership	Zamindars and state officials	Cultivating peasants (tillers of the soil)
Revenue system	High extraction (often up to half of produce)	Reduced demand (one-third of produce)
Access to power	Restricted to elites and intermediaries	Open to peasants, artisans, lower castes
Religious policy	Differential treatment of communities	Equal protection of all religions
Justice system	Elite-biased, patronage-driven	Uniform and non-discriminatory
Nature of state	Hierarchical and extractive	Participatory and welfare-oriented

Egalitarian Social Transformation and the Collapse of Caste Hierarchy

One of the most radical features of Banda Singh Bahadur’s movement was its uncompromising assault on caste distinctions. Unlike earlier reform movements that sought gradual social improvement, the Khalsa regime directly dismantled the symbolic and material foundations of caste inequality. Individuals from the lowest strata of society were appointed to positions of authority, thereby inverting the traditional social order and challenging centuries of entrenched hierarchy.

Contemporary Persian chronicler Muhammad Shafi Warid provides compelling testimony to this transformation. He records that after the execution of Wazir Khan, Banda Singh proclaimed that all Hindus and Muslims who joined the Khalsa would constitute a single collective body, equal in status and obligation. Warid notes that *“the distinction between high*

and low was abolished; a sweeper could sit beside a king without animosity” (Warid, cited in Habib, 2001, p. 161). Such accounts underscore the unprecedented nature of this social experiment.

William Irvine similarly highlights the dramatic reversal of social roles produced by the Sikh revolution. He remarks that in territories conquered by the Sikhs, *“a low-caste leatherworker would leave his home, join Banda Singh, and soon return as the ruler of his birthplace, welcomed with folded hands by the former elites”* (Irvine, 2011, pp. 98–99). This was not symbolic inclusion alone, but the concrete redistribution of power.

Gurbakhsh Singh further emphasises that caste-based inequalities were *“ruthlessly eliminated”* under Banda Singh Bahadur, drawing large numbers of lower-caste Hindus and marginalised communities into the movement (Gurbakhsh Singh, 2005, p. 47). The reaction of orthodox elites to this upheaval is reflected in the derogatory language used by Ghulam Muhiyuddin, who described these newly empowered groups as *“the refuse of Hindu society”* and *“a heavenly calamity”*—revealing elite anxiety rather than social disorder (Gurbakhsh Singh, 2005, pp. 47–48).

Conceptual Model of Egalitarian Governance under Banda Singh Bahadur

Core Principle	Administrative Practice	Social Outcome
Equality of humanity	Appointment of non-elite officials	Breakdown of caste hierarchy
Moral authority	Leadership based on ethical conduct	Legitimate, people-supported rule
Social justice	Punishment of oppressive officials (Sikh or Muslim)	Public trust in governance
Religious tolerance	Protection of Islamic and Hindu practices	Inter-communal harmony
Economic fairness	Abolition of zamindari exploitation	Empowerment of peasants
Collective responsibility (Khalsa)	Shared military and civic duty	Emergence of political consciousness

This table translates Khalsa ideology into governance mechanisms, highlighting the ethical foundation of Sikh

Class Conflict, Jat Participation, and Historiographical Debate

Some historians, notably Muzaffar Alam, interpret this transformation primarily through the lens of class conflict. Alam argues that the rise of relatively lower agrarian groups, particularly the Jats, resulted in violent confrontation with traditional landholding elites such as Rajputs and Ranghars, who were increasingly identified as collaborators of the Mughal state (Alam, 1986, pp. 144–45). He further suggests that the growing dominance of Jat Sikh landlords gradually narrowed the movement’s social base, alienating non-Jat and urban communities, including Khatri Nanak-panthis (Alam, 1986, p. 147).

While Alam's analysis highlights an important social dynamic, it underestimates the **inclusive character** of Banda Singh Bahadur's leadership. The breadth and resilience of the movement cannot be explained solely through Jat mobilisation. As Surendra Singh convincingly argues, the Sikh revolution consciously sought to create a social order outside the traditional caste system and mobilised diverse communities for a humanitarian political project (Surendra Singh, 2010, p. 314). The participation of peasants, artisans, Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims alike indicates a mass movement that transcended narrow class interests.

Religious Tolerance and Inter-Communal Solidarity

Contrary to Mughal propaganda portraying Banda Singh Bahadur as a religious fanatic, contemporary evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates his commitment to religious tolerance. Banda Singh did not frame his struggle as a religious war; rather, it was directed against injustice, tyranny, and exploitation. Sukhdeel Singh aptly notes that while Mughal officials and clerics declared jihad against him, Banda Singh "*never converted his struggle into a religious conflict*" (Sukhdeel Singh, 2015, pp. 99–100).

Persian court newsletters (Akhbar-i-Darbar-i-Mu'alla) record that Banda Singh explicitly prohibited harassment of Muslims and ensured that Muslim soldiers in his army received wages, respect, and full freedom to perform religious practices, including khutba and prayers (Ganda Singh, 1984, p. 63). Another report dated February 15, 1711 documents the induction of Muhammad Bhatti into Banda Singh's ranks, greeted by collective acclamations of "*Waheguru*"—a striking instance of inter-religious participation (Alam, 1986, p. 165).

Letters by Amin-ud-Daula further confirm that Banda Singh won the loyalty of both Hindus and Muslims through personal charisma and moral authority (Ganda Singh, 1999, p. 161). Even administrative appointments reflected this inclusivity: Jan Muhammad was appointed zamindar of Buria pargana, renamed Gulabnagar, and entrusted with military responsibilities (Rajpal Singh, 1998, pp. 29–30).

Justice under Banda Singh's rule was similarly non-discriminatory. Kesar Singh Chhibber records that Sikh officials who oppressed Muslims were promptly punished, reinforcing the principle of equal accountability (Dilgeer, 2010, p. 169). As Harjinder Singh Dilgeer notes, the Sikh movement destroyed no mosques or shrines, underscoring its ethical distinction from sectarian violence (Dilgeer, 2010, p. 41).

Agrarian Reforms and the Democratization of Land

Perhaps the most transformative aspect of Banda Singh Bahadur's regime was his reform of the Mughal agrarian system. Under Mughal administration, zamindars functioned as semi-autonomous despots, extracting revenue without accountability and reducing peasants to near-slavery (Ganda Singh, 1999, p. 59). Banda Singh overturned this structure by confiscating landlord estates and redistributing land to those who actually cultivated it.

Official Mughal reports from January 9, 1711 confirm the introduction of the *batai* system, whereby crops were divided—two-thirds for cultivators and one-third for the state—significantly reducing peasant burden (Ganda Singh, 1984, p. 61). At a public assembly in

Sirhind on May 27, 1710, Banda Singh declared that land belonged to the tiller and proclaimed the end of feudal exploitation (Dilgeer, 2010, p. 42).

These reforms transformed peasants from subjects into stakeholders, laying the groundwork for a participatory political culture unprecedented in early modern India.

The Khalsa as a Political-Moral Community: Ideology and Praxis

Beyond military resistance and administrative reform, Banda Singh Bahadur's movement must be understood as the political manifestation of the Khalsa as a moral community. The Khalsa, instituted by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699, was conceived not merely as a religious order but as a disciplined collective committed to justice, equality, and resistance to oppression. Banda Singh Bahadur translated this ethical vision into political practice, thereby redefining sovereignty itself. Authority under his leadership did not derive from lineage, aristocratic privilege, or imperial sanction, but from adherence to the collective values of the Khalsa (McLeod, 1997, p. 266).

The egalitarian ethos of the Khalsa blurred the distinction between the ruler and the ruled. Leadership was functional rather than hereditary, and service to the community (*seva*) became a criterion of authority. This political ethic sharply contrasted with Mughal notions of kingship, which were rooted in hierarchy, patrimonial authority, and elite control over land and revenue. Banda Singh's rule thus represented a radical departure from prevailing early modern South Asian political culture.

Moreover, the Khalsa's insistence on personal dignity and collective responsibility fostered a sense of political consciousness among peasants and artisans. As Grewal argues, the Sikh movement under Banda Singh Bahadur transformed passive subjects into active political agents by integrating spiritual discipline with social action (Grewal, 2006). The frequent participation of common people in decision-making forums and military mobilisation reflected an emerging political culture that valued collective deliberation over authoritarian command.

This moral-political synthesis explains why Banda Singh Bahadur's authority endured even in the face of overwhelming Mughal repression. Loyalty to him was not sustained merely by material gain or coercion but by ideological commitment. The Khalsa, in this sense, functioned as an early form of popular sovereignty grounded in ethical legitimacy rather than imperial power. (Grewal, 2006, p. 177)

Chronology of Egalitarian Measures under Banda Singh Bahadur (1708–1711)

Year	Event	Political–Social Significance
1708	Banda Singh Bahadur commissioned by Guru Gobind Singh	Moral and ideological legitimacy
1710	Capture of Sirhind	Collapse of Mughal authority in region
1710	Confiscation of zamindari estates	End of feudal dominance
1710	Redistribution of land to peasants	Agrarian empowerment
1710	Public declaration of people's rule (Darbar)	Assertion of popular sovereignty

Year	Event	Political–Social Significance
1711	Implementation of <i>batai</i> system	Institutionalised economic justice
1711	Inclusion of Hindus and Muslims in administration	Secular and inclusive governance

Memory, Martyrdom, and the Long-Term Historical Significance of Banda Singh Bahadur

Although Banda Singh Bahadur’s state was short-lived, its historical significance extends far beyond its temporal duration. His execution in 1716 did not mark the end of the egalitarian impulse he initiated; rather, it transformed his struggle into a powerful narrative of martyrdom that shaped Sikh political memory. Banda Singh’s resistance, suffering, and refusal to submit to Mughal authority became central to the collective consciousness of the Sikhs and inspired subsequent phases of resistance throughout the eighteenth century (Singha, 2000).

The memory of Banda Singh Bahadur played a crucial role in sustaining Sikh identity during periods of persecution. His example reinforced the idea that political power could be morally justified only when exercised in defense of justice and human dignity. This tradition later informed the formation of the Sikh misls and, eventually, the Sikh kingdom under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, which inherited many of Banda Singh’s egalitarian and administrative ideals, particularly in matters of religious tolerance and peasant protection (Oberoi, 1994).

From a broader historiographical perspective, Banda Singh Bahadur’s movement challenges colonial narratives that portray pre-modern Indian resistance as fragmented or sectarian. Instead, it reveals a sophisticated political vision that combined social reform, economic justice, and ethical governance. As Dirks notes, movements that contest hierarchy and redistribute power often leave their deepest imprint not through longevity but through the alternative political imaginaries they create (Dirks, 2001, p 157).

Thus, Banda Singh Bahadur’s legacy lies not only in the territory he governed but in the enduring idea that sovereignty must serve the oppressed. His movement stands as a foundational moment in the history of popular resistance in India, anticipating later struggles that linked political freedom with social equality. (Singha, 2000; Oberoi, 1994)

Conclusion

Banda Singh Bahadur’s movement represents the earliest sustained attempt in Indian history to establish a political order grounded in social equality, religious tolerance, and economic justice. By dismantling caste hierarchies, empowering peasants, and integrating diverse religious communities into governance, he redefined the relationship between power and the people. His revolution was not merely anti-Mughal but fundamentally **pro-human**, subordinating religious identity to ethical governance.

The enduring historical significance of Banda Singh Bahadur lies in his ability to translate Sikh ethical ideals into concrete institutional practices. His brief but profound experiment in egalitarian rule demonstrated that sovereignty could be rooted in justice rather than privilege,

and that political authority could serve humanity rather than dominate it. This remains the most remarkable legacy of the Sikh egalitarian movement under his leadership

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