

Bhai Vir Singh

“Sundri”

Forword

Sundri is the first Punjabi novel which comes from the pen of Bhai Vir Singh. It was conceived during the time period when it was imperative to boost the morale of the Sikhs after the downfall and subsequent annexation of the kingdom of Punjab. The path of austerity was hard to pursue and people had fallen prey to mundane pleasures. Bhai Vir Singh, surcharged with the spirit to redeem the glory of the Sikhs and with abundance of knowledge wrote voluminous literature of didactic nature. He had a purpose in view and his entire efforts were to achieve the same by awakening the masses and the intellectuals to imbibe practical aspects of Sikh religion. In writing such books, the purpose kept in view can be best described in the author's own words:

"Increasing people in our ranks seem to be turning their back on our glorious past. The book stresses the need of recapturing the divine spirit of the Khalsa created by Guru Gobind Singh. The Khalsa represents spiritually elevated people who are blissfully cheerful, fearless, invincible but non-aggressive. The book highlights the glorious manner in which the Khalsa remained steadfast to its high principles even when faced with the greatest odds... Let us hope that it would help us to re-imbibe the spirit of courage, humanity, compassion and all the divine qualities with which our forefathers were gifted."

Base on a popular folk song and set in the historical period of Mir Manu that is notorious for large scale massacre of the Sikhs, *Sundri* is a symbolic representative of that milieu. Nawabs had courtiers were bent upon annihilating the Sikhs. The rulers were lustful and tyrannical. Hindus as a class failed to meet the challenge. At the best they could offer compensation to get back the captured girls. Men like Balwant Singh, brother of *Sundri*, and girls of her stock faced all kinds of persecution at the hands of the Moghul sepoys and humiliation at the hands of Nawabs. The story depicts incidents and events which inculcate universal brotherhood and love for humanity. A Sikh girl treats an injured Moghul sepoy but on learning that she is a Sikh woman he attacks with his dagger. *Surasti*, the earlier name of *Sundri*, was forcibly taken away by the Moghul official but when she is baptised and renamed *Sundri*, she earns respects of the members of the Sikh Jatha who treat her as their own sister.

Through his writings Bhai Vir Singh Succeeded not only in restoring the morals of the people of his time but also in providing the Punjabi - his mother tongue - the honour and glory long denied to it as a result of political and cultural slavery. A Colossus of modern Punjabi Literature, Bhai Vir Singh alone wrote more than all his contemporaries put together. The present attempt to render Bhai Sahib's works in English will go a long way in taking his message to the world at large.

Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan is glad to note that Sri Guru Nanak Satsang Sabha, Gurdwara Katong, Singapore, have taken up a programme to get Bhai Vir Singh's works translated into English and other languages, publish them and make the same available to the people in foreign lands. The Sadan wish the Sabha all success in their noble endeavours.

HARBANS SINGH

New Delhi

April, 1983

Honorary General Secretary,
Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan

Introduction

There is no aspect of Punjabi culture which Bhai Vir Singh has not illumined and enlarged. By his dedicated and inspiring works, he put the Punjabi language on the same pedestal as other modern Indian languages. He is truly the doyen of the Punjabi Commonwealth of letters. He could rightly be called the father of modern Punjabi literature, for he began writing in this language when nobody was interested in it and when people's thoughts were influenced more by Urdu and Persian. All educated Punjabis who know something of the Punjabi language have acclaimed that Bhai Vir Singh occupies in Punjabi the same place as Iqbal in Urdu, Rabindra Nath Tagore in Bengali and Wordsworth in English. His name is a household word in Punjabi. He gave the language a new style, a new rhythm, a new flow and a new thought-content.

As a writer of fiction, Bhai Vir Singh need not be judged critically from the point of view of style and treatment of subjects in his novels. He wrote all his fictional works with a purpose. The purpose was to awaken in the Sikhs the sense of chivalry and to instil in them a sense of pride in their cultural and rich heritage. Bhai Vir Singh emerged on the literary scene at a time when the Sikhs had started harbouring misgivings about the achievements of their ancestors. This is described piquantly by Khushwant Singh in his book 'The Sikhs' (p. 166). He says "English historians harped on the crude and corrupt rule which they had replaced by an enlightened one. Sanskrit scholars belittled the religion of Sikhs as a poor imitation of the Hindus and ridiculed its forms and symbols..." This was too much to endure for a person of Bhai Vir Singh's sensitivity and understanding. He took it as a challenge and proceeded to blow away the dust almost single-handedly. Through his novels, he emphasised the ethical excellence of the Sikh religion and reminded the Sikhs of heroism and chivalry practiced by their co-religionists. His novels SUNDRI, BIJAY SINGH, SATWANT KAUR, and BABA NAUDH SINGH carried an instant appeal for the Sikhs who read them with enthusiasm and pride. They are historical novels written with a religious background. It may be argued that the style and treatment of subjects dealt with does not conform to the standards of fiction. It has to be accepted, however, that these novels do succeed in bringing out the necessary change in the attitude of the Sikhs towards their heroic heritage. Novels like SUNDRI and SATWANT KAUR have gone into scores of editions and are still read by persons having interest in history and religion. By his novels, Bhai Vir Singh was able to put across his message and was thus able in warding off the challenge posed to the Sikh religion by the English historians and Sanskrit scholars, to which a reference has been made above.

Bhai Vir Singh's novel SUNDRI is based on the folksong which narrates the tale of a young, beautiful and recently married Hindu girl. She is carried away forcibly by a Moghul who happens to see her. All the male members of the family go to the officer and entreat him to release the girl. They offer a big ransom. All these appeals fall on deaf ears. The Moghul does not agree to release the girl. To save her honour, the girl decides to burn herself alive. As soon as the Moghul goes out of his camp, she collects the wood, lights the fire and jumps in it. Providentially, her Sikh brother appears then and saves her life. Then the brother and Sister join the roving band of Sikhs. The Sikhs in the days of Zakaria Khan (1726-1745 AD), the last Moghul Governor of Punjab, were mostly hiding in the thick forests and mountain recesses. They were not allowed to move freely in the plains. Sundri, the rescued girl, was respected by the Sikhs. The respect in which women were held by the Sikhs is testified by Qazi Nur Mohammed, the author of Jang Namah. He says, "Whether a woman is younger or old, they call her budhiya, an old lady, and ask her to get away. There is no adultery amongst these dogs."

The death of Zakaria Khan in July, 1745 led to a war of succession between his sons Yahya Khan and Shah Nawaz Khan. This gave some respite to the Sikhs who had been hiding in the mountains. On one side, the Raja of Jammu rose in revolt, and on the other, Sikhs began to cause tumult and trouble. In 1756, Jaspal Rai, brother or Lakhpat Rai, Dewan of Yahya Khan was killed in battle by

the Sikhs. The Sikhs were attacked from all sides near Gurdaspur and a large number of them were brutally massacred. The event has gone down in history as Ghalughara or Holocaust. SUNDRI gives details of this event. The first invasion of Ahmed Shah Durrani in 1748 and subsequent appointment of Mir Manu as the Governor of Punjab are significant events in the history of the Sikhs. During the rule of Mir Manu, the Sikhs were persecuted ruthlessly. Kaura Mal, the Dewan of Mir Manu, was an ancestor of Bhai Vir Singh. The latter therefore, has taken great pains to collect anecdotes relating to his administrative wisdom. SUNDRI ends with the events of 1752 A.D. The same year Kaura Mal passed away. The purpose of Bhai Vir Singh in writing SUNDRI was to present some of the ideal Sikh characters regarding their symbols, religion and their cult of sword, and in this, he succeeded fully. The characters portrayed in SUNDRI became household words in Punjab in later years.

Sundri is the heroin of the novel. She is portrayed as an embodiment of faith and purity. The novel carries an inspiration to the Sikhs who read it with enthusiasm and pride. It is a historical novel written with a didactic purpose. The purpose is to inspire the Sikhs by reminding them of their duty as preached by their Gurus. Through the novel, Bhai Vir Singh is able to put across his message. The fine points of Sikhism and Sikh character are vividly brought out. To mention a few of these, a Sikh makes use of his sword for defensive purposes only or to remove the tyrannical injustice of those in power. A Sikh cannot helplessly submit to the evil designs of his oppressors. He actively struggles for his self-respect, liberty and faith. Even in such efforts, a Sikh shows a high sense of charity to the relatives of his oppressors or even to oppressors themselves. This is his religious faith. This is his spirit. This is his character. He has an abiding faith in the teachings of his Gurus. He lives with his very being saturated by these teachings.

It is not always possible for one to have a proper estimate of the genius of Bhai Vir Singh by reading English renderings of his works. Every language has its peculiarities which cannot be rendered faithfully into another language. Punjabi is no exception to this universal rule. A translation, howsoever painstakingly done, cannot capture fully and successfully the totality or the spirit of the original work. There is, however, a requirement for attempting translation of great works are communicated to the general public not conversant with Punjabi language. By rendering SUNDRI into English, Dr. G.S. Mansukhani has done service to the Punjabi language. The English version is a reasonably successful effort. It succeeds in conveying to the English knowing public the full meaning and the essence of the original work. This effort evokes our appreciation. By his sensitivity and understanding, Dr. Mansukhani has succeeded in placing in our hands a reasonably good version in English of this novel of the great Master. The English version does succeed in capturing the original atmosphere and times in which the novel was initially conceived and executed in Punjabi by Bhai Vir Singh. It must be conceded that the translation done by Dr. Mansukhani is not merely an effort for substituting words of English in place of Punjabi words. It keeps the spirit of the original work constantly in view and faithfully transmits this spirit in English. The English version captures the ethos and excitement of the original. It is readable and enjoyable. It is an excellent endeavour for which Dr. Mansukhani deserves our appreciation and thanks.

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Amidst the blooming grassy farmlands in the plains of the Punjab lay a remote village inhabited by both Hindus and Muslims. A little distance was a dense forest and a lake where people used to go for game- hunting.

To the eastern side of the village was a road leading to the outskirts where a rich Hindu gentleman named Shama lived with his family. Today was the bridal farewell function (*muklawa*) of his daughter who was to leave for her husband's home. It was a happy evening when the soft breeze blew. The house of Shama buzzed with activity connected with the preparation and celebration of the farewell function. The house was overcrowded and it became so stuffy and congested that it was difficult to stay indoors. The bride named Surasti was pretty and exceedingly handsome. Upset by the smoke, she went over to her friends who were playing nearby on the road to the rear of the house. There was a spinning competition for youthful girls-some virgins, some wedded but waiting to join their husbands and some middle aged housewives. None of them could be called ugly by any standard, but compared to the charm of Surasti, they looked like stars around the full moon. Laughing and playing in their gay dresses they made a fascinating spectacle.

Just then two more young ladies who were sisters-in-law brought some rice and wild berries to clean, because closeby was a place with an arrangement for pounding and dehusking rice. At first, the ladies blew off the husks in fun and then turn by turn, they began separating the remaining husks off the grains. When it was time for Surasti to take her turn all the ladies sang in chorus the following line of the folk-song: "Sitting under the shade of trees, we mothers and daughters, our tasks we do....."

The wooden pestle in the hands of Surasti kept beat with the rhythm of the song as though the mortar was a drum. All were so much enraptured by this song that they lost all sense of time and space.

When the song ended, the unfortunate ladies were surprised to find a stout young ruffian Moghul soldier, riding a horse staring at them. His cynosure was the face of Surasti, who out of her maidenly coyness blushed, all of them were so frightened that they became nervous and pale.

Hindu parents, in this age of feudal lawlessness hardly allowed their daughters and daughters-in-law to go out of their home and used to keep them within the four walls like prisoners, because a beautiful wife, a fine house, riches and merchandise could hardly be retained by a Hindu. They were a risky liability against Muslim avarice. The reason for this risk to life and property was that the power of the Delhi Moghul emperor had declined; petty local governors became aggressive and daring; the country was subject to subversion and confusion, and arrogant rulers committed atrocities as they liked.

Dreading the evil intentions of the Moghul youth, the girls got scared. Their nervous uncertainty confirmed their fears when, advancing a few steps, the Moghul caught hold of Surasti's delicate wrist with his sturdy hand and with a jolt pulled her up to his horse and galloped away. The shrieks of Surasti and the sad plight of the women-folk brought all the villagers together and in this confusion they began to ask what had really happened. After hearing the account of the ladies regarding the abduction of Surasti and some of them having witnessed this misdeed happen before their eyes, they were flabbergasted and felt utterly demoralised. What evil times! O, the pity of it! Such degradation of conduct! In this entire group, not even one had the courage and the nerve to take risk and dare rescue the bride.

After the Moghul had disappeared, the elders of the village held a consultation and decided that the lady's father, brother and husband and two elderly representatives of the village should go to the Moghul and plead with him and perhaps out of compassion he might release the lady.

About a mile away from the village, a few tents had been pitched for the Moghul hunting party. These belonged to the ruler of this area and he had come here in search of game; he had very few servants with him. Today when he had gone hunting, he had left no guard in his camp; he had taken all with himself. While chasing a deer, the Moghul got separated from his servants. He rode far out but could not trace the deer; however he saw a village in the distance and rode to it for quenching his thirst and here he captured a lady as his game. When he got back to the camp, he did not find any servant. So leaving the lady on a carpet, he proceeded to tie his horse and began to look for water. Unfortunately, the supply of water had run short. As the Moghul returned to Surasti, he found that a delegation of villagers was approaching towards him. Surasti was sobbing on the carpet, while he took his seat on the bedstead. At that time five villagers prostrated in front of him and requested him to set the lady free. The Moghul remonstrated with them, declaring: "I am the ruler of this region. What does it matter if I take one girl out of the lot in the village? I am sure you will not feel her loss." Shamlal replied with folded hands: "This girl is my only daughter and, she got married recently. Today is the day of her send-off to her husband's home. Please be considerate, otherwise I will be disgraced. Have pity on me; the ruler is considered as the guardian of his subjects."

The Moghul: "Go away; I will not return this lady "

Shama: "Maharaj: you are a great man: if you like I can compensate for her release by giving you silver equal to her weight. Kindly spare her."

The Nawab-grinned and shouted: "Go away."

Thereafter the girl's brother with folded hands and with great humility said: "Sir, you really do not need her. You have a thousand ladies at your disposal. Please take pity on this helpless girl; if you so desire I shall give you gold equal to her weight as recompense. I can buy you girls in her place. You are a generous man, and return this girl to me as a gift." The stony-hearted Nawab remained unaffected and looked in a different direction.

Then the girl's husband - who had come to the village to take his bride from her parental home - touched the Nawab's feet and said: "Sir, I am one of your subjects. It is the duty of the ruler to protect the honour of his subjects. I shall not be able to show my face in public to any one hereafter. Be kind to me and accept whatever money and goods I have as compensation and restore my wife to me. Please save me from disgrace."

Nawab: "Well, you all seem to be very rich. Go away. I shall not part with the golden sparrow. I do not need silver, gold or diamonds. Please go away, otherwise I shall arrest you."

Hearing this, the bridegroom felt frightened for he had unwittingly declared himself a rich man, He feared that the Nawab might attack his house and loot his wealth. It would be wise for him to slip away. Realising this, he went back to his father-in-law's house, where collecting his relatives, he proceeded to his home.

When the ruler did not heed even the entreaties of the village-representatives, the girl's brother fainted and collapsed on the spot. The girl's father sat nearby and sobbed. Seeing this, Surasti suddenly changed. Her tears dried away and she felt a resurgence of courage. She stood up, bared her face gleaming with religious conviction and came to the place where her brother had fainted and

whispered loudly into his ears: "Get up, my brother; go home. I shall not touch even the water of this Moghul I shall burn myself rather than surrender to him,"

The father and the brother (of Surasti) felt convinced that the Moghul would not give up Surasti and she would definitely preserve her honour. They all returned home broken-hearted.

Alas, that beautiful home of Shama which sometime back was full of joy and fun became a place of mourning. All the relatives gathered to offer consolation and the ladies raised a hue and cry and wailed loudly. Hindus and Muslims of the village were scared by what had happened. Alas, it was a catastrophe! It was an uncondonable disgrace of the village.

While such laments were being made, suddenly a Sikh rider (*Singh Sardar*) seated on a green horse (armed from head to foot) dressed in tight drawers-*Kachhera*-and jacket and his waist tied with a sash, a dark turban on his head, robust in appearance (*Singh Sardar*)-whose face would gladden any one's heart, appeared on the spot. All the people looked at him intently, but no one could guess - who he was. Surasti's mother-who was surrounded by other women-recognised the Sikh rider as her own son who had earlier joined the Sikh brotherhood as Balwant Singh. He had left his home and for years no one had heard anything about him. Seeing her son after a long time, the mother's natural affection leapt within her. She got up and held him in her arms after he had got down from his horse. Seeing this, the father and the brother too recognised this young man. Alas! After such a long period of separation, the surge of natural love was suppressed by the narration of the sad story of Surasti's abduction.

As-soon as the Sikh youth heard this story, his blood boiled. His eyes and face glowed with rage and his limbs shook with religious fervour. He inquired the whereabouts of the Moghul's tent. Immediately, he jumped on his horse, as he was keen to rescue his sister. The parents, however, dissuaded him from going to the Moghul's place, for they feared his certain death in the ensuing encounter. In those days, no Sikh was left alive by the Muslim ruler. But Balwant Singh turned a deaf ear to these entreaties. Within minutes, he reached the row of tents. He saw a pile of fuel, which had just been lighted and from the top he heard the faint recitation of some lines of the Japji (Sikh prayer). In a trice, Balwant Singh dismounted his horse and pushed away the pile of sticks and pulled his sister lying underneath. When Surasti looked up, she recognised her brother and could not contain her sudden joy and said: 'My dear brother! At this time when I had decided to burn myself, there was the last wish in my mind that I should see you before my death. The Guru has been kind to fulfil my desire and I am happy to meet you on the eve of my departure from this world. God be thanked! Now you must go back to the place from where you came, for the Moghul is likely to return at any moment and I would like to end my life by immolation before his return.'

Brother: "Dear sister! Suicide is a grave sin; come with me."

Sister: "No, my brother! To die for one's religion is not a sin. If I go away with you, this evil man will destroy our family; he will not spare us either. I am not all afraid of death. I feel the security of Guru Tegh Bahadur's presence with me. Let me sacrifice myself that others may survive."

Balwant Singh heard a sound coming from some distance and grabbing his sister's arm threw her on the saddle and galloped away. When he reached home, his father and brother scolded him: "O you sinner! What have you done? Do you think that the Turk (Moghul) will spare us? When he comes to know that one of our sons is Sikh, he will crush us all. Moreover, you have saved the girl from his clutches. Like an enraged lion, he will pounce on us. Be sensible, go back and return Surasti to him."

Balwant Singh could not tolerate such insulting and degrading words from his parents. He rode back with his sister to the jungle and after an hour's ride reached a spacious opening, which showed gory marks of a recent battle. The place was full of dead bodies and the ground was soaked with blood. He was bewildered to see so much loss of life in such a short time after he left it. Could anyone tell him about this carnage? Where had all his companions gone? He dismounted his horse and inspected the bodies. One of the bodies was still breathing. He lifted it up and found that his wounds were not fatal. He tore off a turban and both he and his sister dressed up the wounds. He brought some water from a neighbouring lake and sprinkled it on the face of the wounded man. The man opened his eyes gently after a while and whispered feebly: "Balwant Singh, thank God; you have met me before my death."

Balwant Singh: "How did it happen? How come, that in such a short time so much havoc has been wrought. Everything is topsy-turvy."

Sher Singh: "O brother! At the time you left us to visit your home, we were planning to stay at this spot, but the Turks suddenly appeared-as if from the blue- and there was a terrible battle. The main group of the Khalsa retreated to the dense jungle. At that moment I fell down, badly wounded. Many Turks lost their lives but they were in great number. I do not know what happened after I fell down."

Thereafter Balwant Singh placed Sher Singh under the shade of a tree and began to search other bodies. He found one, which was still breathing. This Sikh did not have serious injuries: he had been wounded and then become unconscious. Soon after drinking some water and gaining full consciousness, he began narrating his story. He was a strong man and a good rider. They searched for the horses and found two horses tied to a tree; both belonged to the Sikhs who lay dead. A decision was taken that one horse be given to Surasti for riding, and the other horse to the other Sikh. Balwant Singh was to take the wounded Sher Singh on his horse and during the night all were to ride in to the jungle to join their comrades.

Surasti had earlier heard the brave deeds of the Sikh warriors. Her faith in Sikhism was unshakeable. She used to recite regularly and secretly the Sikh prayers (*Gurbani*). Her devotion was deep.

Firm belief or staunch faith is a great power in itself and when it is nourished, it becomes unshakeable like a rock. This eighteen-year old virgin had become deeply pious with unbounded devotion for Sikhism. Earlier she had sent purposely the Muslim youth in search of water; she collected a pile of fuel - which was lying in front of the kitchen-and set fire to it with some dry foliage. Then she seated herself on the pile reciting the *Japji*. At this juncture, her brave brother had come and rescued her. Even so when her own family members rejected her, her faith in Sikhism was not shaken. She began to respect on the hardships faced by Guru Gobind Singh and later by the Sikh warriors. She decided to accompany her brother. When she had reached the plain which had been the arena of a battle between the Sikhs and the Turks and had seen the wounded Sikhs lying on the ground, she was fired by a religious zeal and felt that there was nothing better for her to do than serving the Sikh soldiers who had risked their lives for their faith. She felt convinced that her brother had acquired the courage of his conviction and noble demeanour because of his Sikh faith and living with the Sikhs. He had grown into a noble person. Why could not she be as brave as her brother? She thought that just as the sandal tree imparts fragrance to others, in the same way her heart felt inspired by her brother's example. She began to reflect on the role of women- why should not women participate in the struggle for the defence of morality and religion? If all women could not do so, at least she could set an example of courage by following her worthy brother.

Such thoughts enabled Surasti to keep her cool when she viewed the terrible carnage. She told her brother of her determination to follow his example, and grabbing a sword from the body of a dead soldier hung it round her neck.

While they were in the process of removing the wounded brethren from the field, they saw a cloud of dust rising in the distance. As they looked intently, they found a band of riders galloping towards them. They rightly guessed that these riders were coming in pursuit of the lady-Surasti, whom they had rescued.

The three Sikhs gave free reins to their horses, while a hundred Turks pursued them. The horses ran for three or four miles when Sher Singh's horse stumbled and fell. The result was that his companions had to halt and soon the Turks surrounded them. A fight ensued between the two groups. Sher Singh was killed, while on the other side eight or ten Turks fell unconscious on the ground and the Muslim leader also got wounded. Balwant Singh and Surasti too got injured and their horses were killed in the encounter. Both of them - brother and sister - were captured and put under guard and taken to the jail to face atrocities.

The Sikhs had chopped some trees and plants in the centre of a dense jungle so as to make a clearing for a camping ground. There were many such places in the Punjab where the Sikhs found shelter in those troubled times. They were familiar with the topography of the region, but it was an arduous task for their enemies to enter into those dense jungles to locate them. Now we shall describe a function held in the jungle.

A religious congregation was held in the jungle in the evening. Guru Granth Sahib was placed in a central spot and five Sikhs sang hymns. The leader of this group was Sham Singh, who with his godly and ruddy face of a young man addressed the gathering at the end of the prayers thus: "Brothers, does any one know the whereabouts of Balwant Singh?" All shook their heads to indicate a negative answer. He had been seen going to his village, but had not yet returned. Possibly, he had been lured by the comforts of his home. Sham Singh did not agree with this view and declared: "This is impossible. Balwant Singh and domestic comforts do not go together. Perhaps he has been the victim of some accident or catastrophe; he is not a man to stay away." Rathor Singh said: "Sir, let us send someone to his village to find out the facts." Then another Sikh intervened and said: "If you permit me, I shall proceed to his village for this purpose." The leader replied: "Go and find but about Balwant Singh, but return quickly. Disguise yourself as a Moghul. If you go dressed as a Sikh you may be captured. Also please gather information about the situation of the Khalsa. We have had recently a lot of bad news from Lahore."

Hearing this, the young Sikh whose name was Hari Singh bowed to Guru Granth Sahib. He dressed himself as a Moghul and galloped away on horseback. It was the time of the sunset and darkness soon covered the jungle. This young man was not afraid of riding at night through the jungle. He proceeded ahead like a fearless lion. After some distance, the jungle became dense and impassable. He dismounted and holding the reins of his horse proceeded cautiously and circuitously, sometimes disengaging himself from the curly branches. With great difficulty he passed through the jungle. It was very late in the night when he mounted his horse again and reached a small village. He entered an old inn (*Serai*) where there was a Muslim's restaurant and a Hindu's shop. Both the owners seeing the Moghul approaching them stood up and after greeting him offered him a cot for rest. Then they brought some grass for his horse. The rider declared that he did not want any food for himself. He tied his horse to the cot and spreading a mat on it, he lay asleep. His sleep was disturbed after a couple of hours when a rich Muslim Chief arrived with his retinue. After a great tumult, they retired to their beds. The Muslim Chief went to sleep, while some of his servants began talking in low tones. Hari Singh was disguised as a Muslim. He was resting on a cot nearby. He listened attentively to the conversation of the sepoys which was as follows:

The first sepoy: "Who is this Balwant?"

The second sepoy: "He is a Kafir (Non-Muslim) but a brave soldier who in his encounter with Nadir Shah's army killed Rustam Khan."

First sepoy: "It is our good luck that such a dangerous and brave man has been captured."

Second sepoy: "If you were to see his sister, you would be enamoured of her. Now she is sullen in captivity, but when she was captured I was lucky to see her. She is like the moon I wonder how these maidens of Hindus are so beautiful."

First Sepoy: "Well, this lady will now be converted to Islam."

Second Sepoy: "Yes, then the Nawab will marry her with great pomp and pageantry and we shall also be rewarded "

First Sepoy: "Have the brother and sister agreed to embrace Islam?"

Second Sepoy: "Have the Sikhs ever changed their religion willingly? We have to use force to make them realise the benefits of conversion. They will, if left to themselves, sacrifice their lives rather than change their religion."

First Sepoy: "You are right. They are very obstinate. Hindus are soft like butter, but the Sikhs are hard as stone. Heaven knows from where they have got the strength of their conviction. Well, tell me how much time is left for the event."

Second Sepoy: "Not much, Tomorrow is Tuesday, then will follow Wednesday and Thursday. On Friday, this auspicious event will take place."

First Sepoy: "You must be feeling really happy, your master is lucky to have caught a golden sparrow."

Second Sepoy: "You must also be equally delighted. Your master - the Mulla (Muslim priest) has been called from such a long distance. I am sure he will get a big reward. As such, you will get enough money. However, whether you get any remuneration or not is a separate issue - the very spectacle of watching the conversion of these Sikhs is in itself a holy act."

First sepoy: "That is true, but why has so much time been allowed to lapse. It is more than a month since Balwant Singh was captured, and, why this leniency? Why did they not accomplish this task quickly?"

Second sepoy: "The reason was that both Balwant Singh and his sister were wounded in their fight against the Moghuls and were quite ill, now they have recovered and that explains the cause of delay."

After finishing their talk they fell to sleep, The brave Sikh (Hari Singh) quickly got up, fixed his saddle on the horse and galloped away to his leader it was a dark night; the path-way could hardly be seen; the sky was overcast. The horse stumbled quite often, but the brave Sikh of Guru Gobind Singh never lost his nerve. A little before dawn he entered a jungle and at sunrise reached, his destination.

At this time, all the Sikh's, after taking bath had assembled for the morning congregation. They started the recitation of *Asa-di-var* (a morning prayer). Hari Singh also joined them and listened to the recitation. After the conclusion of prayers, Hari Singh narrated the substance of the talk of the Turkish soldiers to the gathering. Bhai Balwant Singh and his sister lay imprisoned in a jail in the Doaba region (between the river Beas and Sutlej) and were scheduled for forcible conversion to Islam on Friday; That day was Tuesday; if the, Khalsa mustered courage it would be possible to rescue them in time. This news; caused much excitement and; fervour among the Sikhs. Their faces were flushed with rage; their hearts were full of anger and fury. Their sentiments for religion and of courage for its protection were stirred as they loudly, exclaimed! "Guru, Guru."

Sardar, Sham Singh loved every member of his group as much as himself. Balwant Singh, however, was an outstanding warrior and moreover he was now imprisoned along with a Sikh girl; this could not be tolerated. Immediately calling his comrades Sham Singh ordered them to proceed and declared that food would be served on the way. They could not delay in an emergency like this. He announced that they would go through the jungles and save every second. They would depart without any delay on the rescue-mission. They had to be prompt and certain of victory with the Guru's grace. Hearing the order of departure from their leader the Sikhs jumped on their saddles and struggled for their way through the dense jungle.

The sun was covered with dense clouds. Like a disarrayed army, the layers of clouds roamed in the sky. The movement of the wind was also wayward. Sometimes it would be swift and dusty, sometimes quiet and slow. The Moghuls with their conventional loose under sheets were loitering leisurely and proudly; the traders in their modest shops were idling away their time. But in the main mosque of the town things were different. Group after group of Muslims assembled in the courtyard. Outside the gate and in front of the shops stood military guards fully armed.

Something was approaching towards the front gate. It was a palanquin, which rested on the shoulders of four forcibly recruited Brahmin coolies. Inside the palanquin sat a sturdy Mulla (Muslim priest) who had been specially invited for the function fixed for that day. As soon as the palanquin reached the main gate of the mosque, the Mulla came out from the palanquin. He was respectfully greeted by the assembly and seated in the centre of the mosque. Soon thereafter five or seven riders arrived at the spot. The Nawab (ruler) rode on a horse and behind him was a closed palanquin, followed by a man in handcuffs. He wore dirty underwear, a mud-soiled shirt, and a small turban on his head, but his eyes were blood-shot with rage.

At the door of the mosque, a veiled woman got down from the palanquin. She and the captive Sikh entered the mosque and were seated in front of the Mulla. The courtyard of the mosque was overcrowded but there was complete silence. At last the Mulla broke the ice and addressed the captive standing in front of him, thus:

Mulla: "Balwant Singh, do you accept Islam voluntarily and willingly?"

Balwant Singh: "No, rather I shall welcome death willingly."

Mulla (addressing the Nawab): "This man is obstinate. He will not yield willingly. Either he will have to be slain or forcibly...."

Nawab: "I like the latter course. I do not lavish to kill the brother of this moon-like maiden."

Mulla: "Is a barber present here?"

Barber: "Yes Sir, I am here."

Mulla: "Come here and cut this man's hair."

Barber: "Very well."

The barber began to open his bag. Though the captive Sikh's hands were tied with chains, he lunged forward causing a great fright to the frail-framed barber. Seeing this, four sepoy's grabbed Balwant Singh while the barber approached his victim. At this moment, the veiled woman whose hands and feet were tied also, threw away her veil, pushed the barber with her shoulders, rolling him over the dusty ground. She then stood up like a ferocious lioness. Seeing her beauty and her rage, the bystanders were much amazed. The Nawab on the other hand who was enamoured of her beauty was shocked by her angry look, like a man affected by a fall of lightning. The Mulla beckoned two sepoy's to seize the girl and they tied her arms behind her back.

The Nawab was irritated, but what could he do? He was afraid of the Mulla and the crowd. If he had shown any leniency towards the young maid, he would have been censured as weak and compassionate to an infidel. The Nawab cast his eyeful glance at the girl who he expected would become his *Begum* (wife) soon, but even so at this moment she was still an infidel.

In the meantime, the barber regained his composure and wanted to proceed with his task. Surasti was watching the plight and desperation of her brother with love mixed with compassion, and on the other hand she was aware of her predicament and frustration. Alas! Why should a brave brother have to face such degradation on account of the helplessness of an unfortunate sister?

In the meantime, a cloud of dust could be seen over the bazaar; there was a great tumult. Some thought it was a dust storm, others fit that a house had collapsed, yet others thought that an earthquake had begun: some thought that another Muslim ruler was coming with his retinue to join the celebration. All began to look in that direction. In a moment, a group of soldiers appeared out of the dust-cloud and a struggle began between the sepoy's and the group of Sikhs, and suddenly the raiders entered the premises of the mosque and uttered the *Sikh Jaikara* (Bolay So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal) and called out "Balwant Singh." As Balwant Singh stood up, one of the Sikh grabbed the captive and threw him on the saddle of his horse, while another Sikh soldier caught hold of Surasti and placed her on his horse-back and immediately, like a thunder-bolt turning back, galloped away. The rest of the Sikh platoon had surrounded the gathering and as soon as the commander's order for 'Dispersal' was given, the Sikh troopers in a trice, like lightning disappearing after hitting a farm, galloped away from the mosque to the main bazaar and then towards the eastern exit of the village. Suddenly the commander of the platoon ordered his sepoy's to halt and immediately all reined back their horses to a standstill. The reason was that the Muslim guards who were guarding the gate had first thought that the group might be the army of a neighbouring Muslim ruler but they recognised the Khalsa. They hid themselves and remained unnoticed and in the meantime reinforced themselves.

Seeing this predicament, Sardar Sham Singh asked his sharp shooters to take the front line, but before the guards could do anything, the Sikhs shot down the two gunners. Immediately Sardar Sham Singh asked his ten sepoy's to shoot their arrows at the sepoy's standing over the top of the gate. These people were wounded and soon the Sikhs broke down the gate like the shell of an almond. Outside the gate was another group of sepoy's. Sham Singh's strategy worked, as his cavalry striking right and left and pushing their horses forward pierced through the line of the enemy and galloped away.

After the Sikhs had covered ten to twelve miles, they came across an open ground full of blooming crops where they set up a camp. They tied their horses to the tree trunks and cut some fodder for them. Some proceeded to the neighbouring village to buy some foodstuffs. Sham Singh spread a

sheet on the grass and sat down. Others went over to Balwant Singh and Surasti, removed their fetters and brought them to Sardar Sham Singh. Then followed a scene of reunion, which would be remembered always. One by one the Sikhs came forward and embraced Balwant Singh with joy and welcomed Surasti with folded hands and the Khalsa greeting. Soon after the exchange of greetings and the shouts of *Jaikaras* (the calls of Sat Sri Akal) which echoed all over, Balwant Singh and Surasti moved near to Sardar Sham Singh. First Balwant Singh related his own story and described the atrocities he and Surasti had to suffer in jail: But soon he heaved a sigh and declared that his greatest anxiety was the Nawab's resolve to make Surasti his wife by force, and now he was happy and thankful to the Guru for the success of the rescue-mission and the achievement of the Khalsa.

After Balwant Singh had finished his narrative, Sardar Sham Singh explained how, though they hurried through the jungles quietly and stealthily, they lost their way and as such were delayed. That morning they had best hope of rescuing Balwant Singh and his sister in time, but with the Guru's blessing who wanted to preserve their *Dharma* (Faith), they reached by mid-morning a town which was only five or six miles away from the mosque. It was with God's grace again that they reached the place just in the nick of time and gained their objective after a short struggle. If there had been a full-scale battle with the Moguls, they would have been at a disadvantage on account of their small number. It would have been difficult to wrest a victory. These talks continued for quite some time.

After a short while, the Sikhs who had gone to the village returned and reported that the number of Hindus there was small and the Turks were in a majority. None was ready to give them any food; though they had paid for foodstuffs they got nothing because the Hindus were mortally afraid of the Muslims. Sham Singh shouted to them: -"Bring the Panchas (Village head-men) here."- The Sikhs presented two men who they said were the Panchas of the village, whom they had captured.

Sham Singh: "Tell me Chowdhury (chief) why do you not give us food?"

Panchas: "We are commanded by our rulers not to give any food to the Sikhs"

Sham Singh: "At the moment, the ruler is the Khalsa."

Panchas: "We know nothing of the Khalsa. The Khalsa is like the shade of the clouds-now there. Who knows where you will be tomorrow?"

Sham Singh: "Let some twenty people go to the village and bring food. Do not harass any child or woman and do not touch anything except food - stuffs, and pay for it in gold.

As soon as Sham Singh issued this order, three or four Muslim women in veils approached him and began to sob. They were accompanied by a fourteen-year old boy who was their spokesman. He requested that their men-folk should not be harassed or beaten up and that they would supply what the Sikhs wanted.

Sham Singh: "We want only food for our men and horses and nothing else."

Women: "We shall soon send you loaves prepared by Hindu women, but we hope you will not ill-treat our men."

Sham Singh: "No, we shall give you money for the food. The Khalsa will never loot or beat up its subjects. To befool the royal forces and to loot the King's treasure are our tasks. We are enemies of tyrants; we are not enemies of honest people. This is the assignment of the Khalsa. Go and be quick; take money and supply food. Let your men-folk be happy."

The Muslim women soon returned to the village. They collected the Hindu women at one place and gave them wheat flour and pulses for cooking. These women quickly made *chapattis* (loaves) and cooked *Dal* (pulse). The Khalsa pulled out some fresh carrots from the farms and; munched them all. They had a real good meal. Then they released the Panchas. After giving them some gold sovereigns as cost of foodstuffs and carrots, the Khalsa got marching orders. The alertness and promptness of the Sikh guerrillas was remarkable. They rode their horses and sang martial songs like the spring breeze; they steadily moved forward, till they disappeared out of sight.

It was sunset - time when a battalion of Turkish troops in pursuit reached the village. The commander of the troops called the Panchas to find out if any Sikh group had passed through the village.

The Panchas replied: "Yes Sir. They rested here, had their meals and left a few hours back."

Muslim commander: "Who gave them the food?"

Panchas: "The Hindus of the village."

Muslim commander: "Did any Muslim also supply the food?"

Panchas: "No Sir! Do the Muslims ever help the infidels willingly? These Hindus were even delighted when they saw the Sikhs".

Hearing this, the Muslim commander got angry and ordered the arrest of the Hindus. He did not make any inquiry nor called for their explanation. He further ordered that they be beaten up. How unfortunate that the Muslims who had actually supplied the food to the Sikhs were regarded as innocent and the Hindus who had only obeyed their Muslim neighbours in the village were caught in the net! As a result of reckless and severe beating. Some of the Hindus died on the spot. One newly married bride's husband lost his life through severe beating and the lady was asked to marry the Muslim commander. The pious lady requested that she should be killed like her husband. But who was there to listen to her woes? In sheer desperation, the lady moved forward and gave such a blow on the eyes of the commander that he lost his eye and became unconscious. A Pathan soldier promptly drew his sword and aimed a heavy blow on the lady's head, which was severed with a jerk, and the sharp point of his sword pierced the commander's body.

For the Khalsa, things moved smoothly for some days. There was joy and hectic activity in the jungle. Under the shade of trees, these spiritual warriors were quite busy, but on the alert. They followed the daily chores of camp life: some were reciting their prayers, some mending their clothes, some collecting fuel for the *Langar* (Free kitchen), while some went far and near in search of fruits. Altogether these lion-hearted Sikhs were enjoying themselves in this comfortable and self-supporting shelter. They had forgotten about their parents and their families. Their spirits were imbued with love and devotion to Guru Gobind Singh. They regarded the preservation and protection of their faith as the goal of their lives. For this reason, they enjoyed their stay in this spot, feeling mentally free like fearless lions.

One evening when the whole group had taken their *Langar* (dinner) and were retiring to rest, Sardar Sham Singh talked to his companions thus:

Sham Singh: (addressing Surasti) "O respected lady! What is your plan about your own future?"

Surasti "Sir, I will follow your orders."

Sham Singh: "There is no such thing as an order. We shall do our best as you desire. If you like, we can bring your husband and then you both live together here. If you want to be taken to your husband's place, we can do that. But the Moghuls will not leave our pursuit and you will be again under the captivity of Moghuls. Whatever you desire will be done. Balwant Singh is our brother. All the Sikhs love him. He is an ideal Sikh and a great warrior. You are his sister and the entire group here regards you as their sister."

Surasti: "Sir and my brethren! Married life does not appeal to me and as you know my husband has also renounced me. It was his duty to protect me, which he has refused to do. I do not wish to return to that domestic kind of life again, from which the Guru has pulled me away. My sole aim is that my entire life be dedicated to the service of the Khalsa. If you permit me, I shall live amidst my brothers here. In peacetime, I shall work in the *Langar* (Free Kitchen); in wartime I shall also stay with you and serve and look after my wounded and disabled brothers. I cannot brook the idea that while my brave brothers should offer their sacrifice for the protection of Sikh Dharma, I should refrain from devoting my life to my religion. I want this gift from you that I should read Gurbani, meditate on the Holy Word and serve the community. If my life is dedicated to my faith, there will be none more fortunate than me.

The eyes of a lion like Sham Singh were full of tears (of joy) and his body shook with emotion. He thought for a while and said:

"Our life is very hard; we have always to face calamity and ordeals. These days we can not move even in our own part of the country. How will you face the sufferings of the group?"

Surasti: "God will give me courage. I shall bear all the sufferings and utilise my time in your service."

Sardar Sham Singh reflected for a while and replied: "You are not an ordinary woman; you are a goddess. Blessed be your birth that you are full of love for religion. O respected sister! May God fulfil your wishes! From my side, there is no restriction or condition. You are free to serve the Khalsa community in any way you like. You make your life useful to others. But you must always have the courage of a man to face this kind of hard life."

Balwant Singh: "O sister! You have expressed your sentiments so truly. You have received the Guru's blessings. Truly you are the Guru's daughter. Your courage is that of a lioness. God will help you! May the hand of Mai Bhago bless you!"

Surasti: "O my brother! This body is mortal and must perish. If it is used up in the service of the Panth (Sikh community) there is nothing more profitable for my soul than this. Remember how the children of Guru Gobind Singh sacrificed their lives to uphold the teachings of the Guru and how cheerfully Bhai Mani Singh had his body cut at every joint. O brother, if such great souls made such tremendous sacrifices, why should we crave to preserve our bodies. I have seen my parents, relatives and others and realised that all these worldly affections are false. You saved me from the burning pyre and put your life at risk and as such you have not acted like an ordinary brother. There is religious zeal and devotion in you; there is love for the Guru in your heart. You have a sense of self-respect. For this reason you have shown so much compassion to me. Now I feel that religion is a very valuable thing for it inspires one to true and noble action and, therefore, why should I turn my back to it. Perhaps you have a notion that a woman is physically weak and as such she must be mentally weak too. Please banish this idea from your mind. The heart of a woman is soft like wax and also hard like a stone; when the religious fervour inspires a woman, she becomes so firm that none can shake her resolve. I am not saying this out of brag or arrogance, but on account of a firm conviction in the Guru's grace. I know his blessings fill me with these sentiments."

Hearing this, Sham Singh and Balwant Singh blessed the lady. It was rather late in the night. All of them went to sleep after saying their prayers.

It was the season of spring and the early dawn was refreshing. The morning prayers made the environment blissful and it seemed that the jungle-camp was a heaven. Early in the morning, Guru Granth Sahib was ceremoniously installed and the congregation was held. First, Sham Singh informed the gathering that Surasti had decided to devote her life to the cause of Sikhism and that she - indoor and outside, in times of peace or war - desired to serve the Sikh community. For this reason, the lady should be baptised with *Amrit* and made the Khalsa and she should be considered as a spiritual sister. The entire congregation should regard her as a daughter of Guru Gobind Singh and Mata Sahib Devan. She should be treated like a sister. Then she was baptised according to the ceremony of Amrit and given the name of Sunder Kaur and she became popular as Sundri.

The joy of the Khalsa congregation knew no bounds. This was a lucky day when one of their own sisters who had been rescued from the jaws of a lion was ready to devote her life to the cause of Sikhism and would hereafter be sharing the hardships and sorrows of her brethren by dedication to their service for the remaining portion of her life. Every one in this group had been denied the sisterly affection and the tender love and intelligent guidance of women-folk. There was not one who had not severed his connection with his mother, sister and wife just for the preservation of his faith and had been leading the rough and adventurous life of a patriot guerrilla for quite some time.

Dear reader! This young lady's vow of dedication produced such a radical impact on this warrior-group, ever ready for sacrifice for preservation of moral and human values, that one and all began to look upon her as a sister or mother and offered thanks to the Guru. On such occasions the Guru's Word is understood in its true significance, when the human mind, free from sorrow, unconscious gets in tune with the Creator.

O friends of the Sikh religion! Remember this auspicious occasion with devotion and you will for once shed tears of joy! How blessed and blissful were those days! It was a period of *Satyuga* (The Age of Truth), when seeing a young maiden amidst them, the entire group looked upon her (Sundri) as a holy goddess, as their foster sister with the same brotherly feeling as for their real sister. All of them greeted her with joy and bowed to her with reverence. This was the purity and excellence of character, which the Guru had taught to the Sikhs. That is the reason why the community, overcome by the love of the Guru was ready to sacrifice itself. It was linked with the Guru through devotion and lived on the sustenance of the Holy Name.

When the religious service came to an end, Sundri got busy in cooking food in the free kitchen and later all shared home-made delicious food with joy. In this way, this pious lady spent some time in the service of the Khalsa.

Just as in between the thirty-two hard bony teeth lies the soft and tender tongue which performs vital services for the benefit of teeth, and even so the teeth do not hurt the tongue in any way but on the contrary protect it, in the same way, in the midst of the brave soldiers of Sardar Sham Singh's guerrilla-group, Sundri-the paragon of humility and sweetness-lived peacefully. Both morning and evening, she cooked food in the Free kitchen with helpers; even when all have had their food, she performed sundry tasks and simultaneously recited her prayers mildly. When no food was available or there was shortage of foodstuffs (ration), the Khalsa had to subsist on fruits and sweet herbs and roots available in the jungle. In this work of collecting herbs, Sundri became quite active. In her leisure she went into the jungle looking for the trees with edible fruit.

To the north of the jungle was a hill. One day Sundri climbed to the top and went over to the other side, and a little further lay a village abounding with luxuriant cereal plants. She went to the village

and saw some short and active men who happened to be Hindu peasants. Sundri visited this village often to buy a few things, but nobody in the village knew who she was and where she lived.

Once, the Free kitchen of the Khalsa had no rations. The wild fruits and herbs were no longer available and there was no money to buy food for the troops. All the Sikhs were worried about the future as they faced starvation. Sundri had a golden ring studded with a diamond. She thought of selling the ring to buy food and proceeded to the village for this purpose. However, none in the village knew the value of the diamond. One or two traders saw it. But they could not tell whether it was a real or fake diamond. While returning disappointed Sundri saw a boy clad in white dress, sitting as if in despair, at the end of the bazaar. On seeing the beauty of Sundri and her moon-like face he could not but notice her disappointment.

Khatri: "O lady, who are you and why do you look so sad?"

Sundri: "I am sad because I cannot find a buyer for my diamond ring."

Khatri: "Can I see the ring?"

Sundri showed him her ring.

Khatri: "The ring is beautiful. The diamond is also real and it is worth five to seven hundred rupees. But alas! I am like a wingless Koel bird fallen from the mango tree. Alas, I have no money or property, otherwise I would have given you its price." Drawing a deep breath and his eyes filled with tears he said: "O lady May Lord Shiva fulfil your desire. If you take this ring to a city, you will get good money there."

Sundri: "Well, let me leave it to the Guru. But tell, me first, why being a man, you are weeping? Tears are usual with women, but men do not shed tears."

Khatri: "O lady, you are a woman and I am a helpless man, Neither you can alleviate my grief nor I can meet your need. I can not suggest anything. Go your way and rest at home. I guess you are in some trouble, and therefore you want to sell this ring. I say you are lucky because you are hiding yourself from the atrocities of the Moghul rulers. Living in towns or villages is like living in hell.

Sundri: "O my friend; I am quite happy. You may call me a helpless woman, physically weak, but I am strong in mind. Men of my community are brave whose courage is admitted even by the Turks."

Khatri: "Who can face the challenge of the Turks? The Sikhs had risen in revolt and inflicted losses on the Moghuls, but our brothers, may they be damned, are destroying the very footprints of the Sikhs. I am amazed that though the Sikhs are decimated, they somehow keep growing in number to sacrifice themselves for the preservation of their faith. Now recall the latest event! Lakhpatrai, proceeding from Eminabad, is causing havoc among the Sikhs. O Mahadevi! What is happening these days!"

Hearing the words "havoc among the Sikhs," Sundri's face was flushed with indignation, but controlling her temper she said gently: "Please tell me something about yourself."

Khatri: "O respected lady, if you insist, I shall tell you my sad tale. About twenty to thirty miles away from this village and a little remote from the highway is a small Muslim village. There are quite a number of Hindu families living there. There is a fine Shiva temple. Our family has had an ancient lineage. During the reign of Akbar, one of our ancestors held a high office under Raja Todarmal. We had a lot of wealth, which was still, continue to hold. We belong to a high caste

among the Khattris. The petty ruler and his soldiers also live in the village. A few days back when I went to the temple to make my offerings, my wife went to the rooftop of our house to dry her hair. The mansion of the Moghul ruler is situated at a high elevation. From his house, he spotted my wife and enquired about her. He then summoned me from the temple and remarked that the Moghul emperor at Delhi had got information that I had some royal jewellery from Akbar's treasury in my house and if I did not surrender it, I would be imprisoned. I replied, "It is ages since Akbar died: my ancestors have also passed away. There is no proof that I have any ancient jewellery with myself." He reprimanded me and called me an infidel and said: "How dare you tell lies before the Faithful (Muslim)? Get away from my sight." He signalled his sepoys who grabbed me and took me to jail. He also kept a guard over my house. Next day, he sent a message to the effect that if I surrendered my wife, I would be released. On hearing this, I was extremely distressed. Alas! How could I tolerate the idea of my wife being forcibly taken by another man!"

The Khatri continued: "When I regained my senses, I offered my golden bangle and rings to the jailer for my release. He accepted them and I was freed. I went to my house only to find that my wife had already been abducted by the ruler. He had also ordered the soldiers to keep my house under strict watch. I felt desolate and utterly helpless and I left the village and passed two days in grief and sobbing. Soon through a trick, I obtained information that my wife had not yet lost her chastity and was confined in jail. There was a strong rumour also that she had entered the ruler's harem (women's quarters). I passed one more day in disguise and came here to find out if some one could help me to rescue my wife. I would have welcomed death, but somehow I still like to live, and would not die."

Sundri: "O calamity-stricken friend! Suicide is a great sin. If you want to rescue your wife, come with me. My brothers will help you in recovering your wife. If you are sure that your wife has accepted the Muslim faith of her abductor and you do not wish to meet her, my brother will provide you some religious or charitable work so that your life may be useful to the community."

Khatri: "O lady; your words are so sweet and reassuring that they have brought comfort to my ailing heart. They are like straws which save a drowning person. I have no way of protecting myself or finding some means of regaining my wife. I find darkness of despair all around me. Calamities have crushed me. For what sin is our country suffering such atrocities? Why has such a misfortune overwhelmed us? Where have our gods and goddesses vanished? Why do not the saints and prophets come to our rescue? The gods themselves are in distress. O Shiva! O Vishnu! You all seem to be under a cloud! What havoc has been wrought to us! Why is it that the sinful are not destroyed? Why their misdeeds are not prevented? Woe, betide me! Why this injustice? What for?"

Such outbursts of inner agony and the deep frustration of the Khatri boy shook the very soul of Sundri. Gathering her composure, she replied "O noble soul! All misfortune is the result of neglecting the true worship of God and engaging oneself in useless ritual. With firm faith in God, all man's tasks are accomplished. The children of one God are like real brothers. When brothers join together, they become a power to reckon with. Disunity and selfishness are the flaws of our countrymen. Our factionalism is a great malady and we are all suffering for it."

The Khatri lost in his sorrow sat like a statue. Sundri grabbed his arm and shook him. As she accompanied him out of the village, she said: "These are difficult and evil times. The Sikhs live in isolation and keep hidden and as such we cannot tell others of their hideouts. I shall, therefore, tie a bandage over your eyes and when we reach a safe place, I shall remove the bandage." The boy agreed to it. Sundri bandaged his eyes and leading him through a difficult path-way in the jungle reached her habitation after some time.

As she reached the camp, her heart was gladdened to see her people so joyfully occupied. The cauldrons were brimming with hot food over the piles of burning fuel. She could feel the appetising smell of the cooking of delicious food. She asked a Sikh what was cooking in the pots. He replied that meat was being cooked. He further explained: "We had no rations. As such the group leader and Balwant Singh had gone for hunting and killed a flock of deer. That venison is being prepared for the Sikhs. Where have you been? You have been out for a long time."

Sundri replied with a smile: "O brother, you did not have any serious occupation for many days. I had gone out to find some work for you."

Sikh: "Have you got any task for me?"

Sundri (facing the Khatri): "Look at this man."

By this time Balwant Singh arrived and asked his sister who the man was. Sundri told him the whole story. Then the two Sardars took the Khatri aside. Sardar Sham Singh's heart was moved to hear the whole story. He could see through Sundri's devotion and her resolve to sell her ring to help her brethren in distress and his heart was full of gratitude. He addressed Sundri: "You are really a goddess." Then he asked an attendant to - take the Khatri to the Free kitchen and there to untie his bandage and give him food. As a precaution, he told Balwant Singh to keep an eye on the new comer; perhaps he could be a spy and as such his talk, actions and movements should be watched. He sent another Sikh to the village to verify the information given by the Khatri.

Sundri had not forgotten her days spent in jail. She could visualise the feelings and the plight of the Khatri's wife and how every minute was precious in securing her release. She desired that every effort be made as early as possible to protect the honour of the helpless lady, but she could not forestall or force a decision which was to be taken by their leader in this case. She knew that his wisdom and diplomacy was greater than that of any other member of the group. The entire Sikh community valued the wisdom and guidance of their leader - Sardar Sham Singh.

Three days after the occurrence of the above event, the village wherein the Khatri's wife was held in captivity was full of activity as usual in the morning. People were busy making their purchases in the shops. Soon it was noontime. Women got busy in their homes preparing their lunch. There was a joyful scene in the mansion of the local Muslim ruler. He was sitting in his court. There were a few subordinate officials with him. Some courtiers were gossiping in the distance. Wine was being served: delicacies were laid out for all. Some were busy drinking wine, while others were busy joking among themselves.

There was a lot of bustle in the female apartments. Six Begums (wives of the ruler) were seated on a carpet. Slave-girls were in attendance. The ladies were extremely beautiful; it looked as if they were candidates in a beauty competition. They looked very handsome in their silken clothes and costly jewellery. In their midst was one woman who looked quite sad. Her beautiful dress and valuable jewellery and sullen looks gave an impression of a newly caught *maina* (starling) kept in a golden cage. All other ladies were either talking or laughing or joking, but this one was dead quiet. At times, she heaved a sigh and tears dropped from her eyes. Others called her out but she never looked at them. One of the ladies remarked "She is a new sparrow in a cage. She will get used to it after some time."

Lunch was announced and soon a sheet of cloth was spread. Different dishes were laid out. After uttering words invoking God's grace, they started eating. This quiet lady, however, maintained her silence. When the other ladies pestered her and urged to take food, she started sobbing and in a dim voice prayed: "O Shiva, destroy them!" When the ladies harassed her too much she cried loudly and

she could be heard all over. All were filled with rage because she had spoiled the enjoyment of their lunch. Almost all were ready to beat her up, but one of them took pity on her and said: "O sister, let her alone. She cannot help but cry. When I was brought here, my plight was worse than hers. Slowly she will get used to this place."

For a while the ladies held their peace, but later they realised that she needed some food. Some began to persuade her to eat, but this helpless lady was not consoled. Suddenly one of them pounced on her and held her hands and tried to force some mutton - curry into her mouth. At this time, the Muslim ruler, who has drunk, came on the spot. He thought that the ladies of his harem were acting as if jealous of the new comer. He was enraged and showered blows on them and took away the Khatri young lady to his room. He was out of his senses and he began to rant and rave. At this time, the miserable lady thought that there was no chance of her being able to preserve her chastity and therefore it was time to end her life. She thought that as she was sitting near the window, it would be wise for her to jump down, but alas, death seldom befriends the unfortunate ones. The ruler got wild on account of his frustration and with eyes red with anger, he caught her by her wrist and was about to say something nasty, when his voice gurgled and he faltered.

What had happened to him? What was the Nawab going to utter? Why had his voice failed? Some strong hand had grabbed the Nawab by the neck, with the result that he was unable to utter what he wanted to. At this time, a tumult arose in the town as if a battle had started. In an instant, five or six people went upstairs. The Nawab was captured. The Begums were motionless like idols; the slaves disappeared behind secret doors. The Hindu lady shouted: "O God, help me as you once saved the honour of Dropadi." In an instant, a lady and a Hindu boy came up. When the lady saw the Hindu, she was overjoyed. The Hindu approached the imprisoned Hindu lady who immediately remarked: "Please, keep away from me. I have strayed from Hinduism!" Hearing this, the lady who had accompanied the Hindu youth asked her: "Have you lost your chastity?" She replied: "No, I am quite perfect in my virtue, but Muslim food had been given to me by force." Hearing this, the lady who was no other than Sundri said: "Dear sister, you are great who in spite of having been forced through all these sufferings have preserved your chastity!"

One foolish Sikh wanted to remove the ornaments of the Begums, but Balwant Singh quickly stopped him, saying. "It is not in keeping with Sikh religion to harass a woman." Even Muslim historians have pointed out this characteristic of the Sikhs. Observing such maturity and wisdom of her brother, Sundri was much pleased.

In a few minutes, the Sikhs tied the Nawab's hands and feet, and brought him down. Sardar Sham Singh had ransacked the treasury of the Nawab and loaded his horses with the booty. The entire force of the Khalsa took upon themselves to punish the Moghul ruler and redress the complaints of the oppressed Hindu and poor Muslim citizens. They had taken some steps to render the bodyguards of the Nawab ineffective by locking them up. They punished all the guilty ones. The Khalsa had acted with such fury and alertness that no one could even dream that a thunderbolt would come through the clouds. This was the achievement of the special skill and strategy of the Khalsa and their sharp shooting riflemen. The helpless Khatri lady and the Nawab were taken by Sardar Sham Singh and Balwant Singh to the Khatri's house. They spread a carpet and sat on it, Now the Sikh troops collected outside the town, About twenty soldiers joined Sardar Sham Singh. Sundri sat with the Khatri's wife who had been rescued. Sham Singh ordered that all the Brahmins of the town be summoned. Two Sikhs went out to implement the order. The Khatri entered his house to see if any of his belongings had been looted, but to his good luck, nothing had been lost.

At this time, an old woman supporting herself on a staff and shedding tears came there and in a feeble voice murmured: "O you Sikh warrior, may your rule last for ever. You are like a saviour sent by God. Give solace to my heart. May God bless you!"

Hearing her cry for help, Sundri's heart melted. She asked the old lady: "What is the matter?"

Old Woman: "O my daughter! What shall I tell you? The ruler who is sitting here tied like a thief has done a great injustice to me. I had only one son whom I brought up with difficulty and prayers. Unfortunately one day, he happened to pass along the palace and out of curiosity peeped into one of the windows-where there was nothing-but this Nawab saw him and got into a rage and the boy-a son of a destitute like me-was beaten to death. I made several entreaties to him, but his stony heart would not relent. O God's agent, dispense justice to me!"

Hearing this, the ruler's face became pale with shame. The hearts of the Sikhs melted on hearing the old woman's tragic tale. Sham Singh thought for a while and questioned four or five neighbours on the veracity of the woman's complaint. They confirmed her version of the event.

After a minute, a young Muslim woman, carrying a child barely covered with rags in her lap, came up crying. Looking at her, Sham Singh asked: "O lady, why have you come here?" She replied: "I regard you as a messenger of God sent to dispense justice. My husband was a courtier of this ruler, and we were quite affluent. One day, being drunk, he quarrelled with the Nawab. At that very moment the Nawab got him murdered and looted our house and made me a beggar. Now there is not a grain of corn in my house. I beg for food but hardly get anything. What shall I do? I will prefer death to this kind of life. You appear to be a scourge of tyrants. Do help me-a woman in distress."

Hearing this, the Sikhs were overcome by a feeling of hatred for the Nawab. Sham Singh got a bag of money from the Nawab's treasury and handed it over to the lady saying, "Go and utilise this money and live in comfort."

Seeing this, a Brahmin said in a faint voice: "The Sikh Sardar does not take a mature view of the situation. Look, he has given money to a Muslim lady. The Sardar who heard the Brahmin's remark retorted. "Listen, O Brahmin! We do not discriminate on grounds of caste or religion, nor do we bear ill will to any one-whether a Hindu or a Muslim. Our Gurus bore no grudge against anyone; the whole world is to us like a family. We have to uproot injustice and deal fairly with every one. We have to punish the rulers who are oppressing the people; punishing them means uprooting injustice."

Brahmin said: "Then why do you destroy the Turks? Why do you not surrender to them?"

Sham Singh: "Panditji, our opposition to the Turks and the Pathans is not due to their being Muslims. Our objective in uprooting the Moghul rule is that as rulers, they are tyrants causing suffering to their subjects. They are not dispensing justice: they kill the innocent and the helpless; they collect taxes but do not protect the people. They interfere in religious matters; they forcibly destroy other religions. These are serious crimes and in no way form part of the duties of the ruler. It is for this reason that we want to destroy their tyrannical rule. We have no enmity against any caste or faith. Our Gurus had come to propagate true religion we are devoted to their ideas, and according to their tenets we are destroying those who perpetrate injustice and cause suffering to God's creation. Look, the rulers are tyrannical, violent and power-hungry; they are neither afraid of God or of their masters in Lahore or Delhi. The sovereign power of Delhi is declining; the situation in Lahore is worsening from day to day.

After hearing these arguments, the Brahmin kept quiet.

In the meantime, the remaining Brahmins and Khatri of the village who had been summoned arrived there.

Sardar Sham Singh addressed them as follows:

"Look, this lady has firmly maintained her chastity; God has protected her honour. But the Turks forcibly imposed their religion on her by compelling her to take mutton-curry. Now take compassion on her and admit her back to the Hindu fold, and regard her as one of your own. Then we can bid you farewell. But the Brahmins and the Khatri replied: "Sir, this is not possible; our old tradition stands against it. Hindu religion is a fragile thread; it easily breaks. You know that a fallen fruit cannot be rejoined to the tree."

Hearing these cynical views, Sundri explained to them with great affection, as follows: "It is none of the faults of the lady but rather you should give her credit for her courage and welcome her back into your fold. Do not discard one who seeks your support. Neglecting those who seek your refuge is a great sin. It is immoral not to help the helpless."

But Sundri's gentle words produced no effect on those Brahmins. Balwant Singh and Sher Singh also explained to them their correct and rational views, but the conservative traditional Hindu beliefs could not be resolved from their minds, namely that Hindu Dharma is a fragile thread, and that a Hindu is born as a Hindu and no one can be converted to Hinduism by some ceremony. This idea had taken deep roots in their thinking. Even after seeing the difficult situation in which they were placed, the Brahmins did not change their views. Observing this rigidity, the Khatri and his wife entreated them several times but without success.

Sham Singh's patience came to an end. He ordered that *Karah Parsad* be prepared. As soon as it was ready, *Ardas* (supplication) was recited. He then ordered the Khatri's wife to distribute the *Karah Parsad* and declared that those who did not eat it would be thrashed. The Brahmins were scared by this announcement. Sundri got excited: she got up and took the Khatri aside. She suggested to him to give a gold sovereign to each of the Brahmins and then touch their feet one by one and then they would take *Karah Parsad*. The Khatri followed her advice. He started giving one sovereign each; then his wife distributed *Karah Parsad* to ail of them. They ate it and after blessing the gathering left for their homes.

Sardar Sham Singh ordered the Sikhs to pack up and leave, but the Khatri and his wife humbly said: "We do not want to stay in the village; we want to ' go with you and we shall serve your group. The reasons for this decision are, firstly, if we stay here, we shall always live in fear, but if we accompany you we shall feel self-reliant and bold. Secondly when the Turkish sepoys come here, they will give vent to their anger by punishing us. Now that you are about to leave, we want to accompany you. We shall have the chance to serve philanthropists like you, our lives will be put to some good use. Please take all our wealth so that it may be of some benefit to the Khalsa. Here it will be of no use, for we have no children."

After some discussion, the Khatri's request was accepted. The Khalsa forces decided to proceed towards the dense jungle, but before leaving, the Sikh Sardar collected the residents of the neighbouring two villages and declared: "This ruler has been oppressing the people; he has taken excessive revenue from the Zamindars (landowners); he has looted a number of rich men and pushed them out of their houses naked he has murdered a lot of innocent people and tortured harmless people and as a ruler has, like a thorny bush, hurt one and all. Instead of dispensing justice, he has wasted his time in drink and debauchery and the people who were under his charge have been subjected to extreme misery. For all these crimes, he will now receive his due punishment." Immediately two scavengers threw a rope round the Nawab's neck and hanged him on the tree. Seeing him writhing in pain, the Hindu and Muslim on-lookers felt relieved. However, two evil-minded Mullas who were his servants and abettors in his crimes felt sad at his death.

Soon after reaching the next jungle camp, the Khalsa performed the baptismal ceremony of *Amrit* for the Khatri and his wife. The Khatri was given the new name of Dharam Singh and his wife was renamed Dharam Kaur. Earlier, the Khatri was a gentle and docile man and had become further weakened by the unhappy events mentioned above, but now he began to think of his future, and influenced by the heroic company, he became full of hope and joy. After taking *Amrit*, he felt strong in body and mind and became fond of walking fearlessly through the jungle. His wife in the company of Sundri served in the *Langar* and began memorising *Gurbani*. One day, there was no salt in the Free Kitchen. Sundri and Dharam Kaur proceeded towards the hills on the other side of which, lay a village they had visited many times. It was noontime. Sundri like a fawn ran towards the village. She purchased salt and spices and proceeded towards her home. After covering some distance and slightly away from the pathway, she heard a cry for help. She stopped for a while and proceeded in the direction from where the mournful sound was coming. As she looked ahead, she saw a bleeding person lying on the grass. She approached him and looked at him carefully. There was a sword-injury on his shoulder and his body was full of small stabs all over. Blood freely flowed from his wounds. Seeing the terrible condition of the man, this bold daughter of Mata Sahib Devan did not lose her nerve. She tore a piece of her own scarf and removed the blood and cleaned the wound. She told Dharam Kaur to go out in search of water. With great courage, she bandaged the wound with the man's turban. In the meantime, Dharam Kaur brought her scarf fully soaked in water, which Sundri rinsed into the mouth of the wounded man and also cleaned his hands and feet. Very soon, the man regained consciousness and uttered the words "Allah! Allah!" mournfully: and later opened his eyes.

The wounded person was amazed when he observed for himself that he was being cared for in such a nice way during this plight. He wanted to speak, but could not do so on account of shyness. Sundri thought that if the man was left there in this condition; he would die. She also felt that if the man was taken to the village she might get into trouble. There was another alternative, namely of taking him into the jungle but it was difficult to carry him and moreover being a Turk, her brothers might object and call her crazy. She consulted Dharam Kaur, and both agreed that the wounded Turk should be taken to their camp for treatment. Undoubtedly, a Sikh's duty is to serve others, no matters what others may think of it.

With great difficulty and great effort, the two brave ladies carried the man over the pathway and stopped halfway through the jungle for a little rest. They proceeded with their heavy burden and at sunset they reached the camp, where under a Banyan tree, they spread some grass and covered it with a clean sheet and placed the wounded man on it. They fed him gently.

When Sundri told her brother about this event and when Sham Singh came to know of it, both rebuked her for her indiscretion. They explained to her their point thus: "Though compassion is one of the obligations of Sikh Dharma, the times are so critical that we must protect ourselves against the machinations of the Turks, who had crafty ways and had sworn to destroy the Sikhs. It was futile to expect any good from them. If the Sikhs had been in a better situation, we would not have bothered about this case. In such a calamitous period, survival is our main objective."

Sundri replied: "Brothers, I admit my mistake and I shall not act hastily again. I am sorry I have brought this man, but in future I shall be careful. If he dies, there will be nothing to worry about; if he survives, we shall take him blind-folded and leave him at some distant place."

After assuring her brothers, Sundri got busy with her routine. Every day whenever she could spare time, she would serve him and dress his wounds and give him food. After a month's care, the Moghul youth's wounds got healed and he started moving about. He would thank Sundri for her services and would speak highly of her to others. He was, however, greatly amazed to observe

(from his personal experience) that the Sikhs who are so strong and rough are full of the milk of human kindness. Such qualities, which are poles apart like water and fire, are found in Sikhs alone.

Sardar Sham Singh had ordered four Sikhs to keep a watch over the movements of the Moghul so that he may not run away and then inform their enemies of their location. After sometime when he had perfectly recovered, he sought permission to leave. It was decided that his eyes be bandaged with a piece of cloth and then led by a Sikh to some distant place. Even so, Sham Singh had his own misgivings and apprehensions that all would not go well with the Sikhs, hereafter.

After a few days, just about sunset time, when Sundri was returning from the village, and was crossing the pathway to her destination, she heard some one shout "stop" As she turned round, she saw four armed Turkish sepoy's coming from behind a tree. She was taken aback at this ambush, but she put up a brave face. In a moment they surrounded her. Sundri's hand instantly reached the handle of her dagger, which was hidden under her scarf, and she mustered courage and asked: "Who are you and what do you want?"

Sepoy: Tell us the place where the Sikhs are?

Sundri: I cannot tell where they are.

Sepoy: If you do not tell us, we shall outrage your modesty.

Sundri: One who dares to touch me will be killed.

Sepoy: We will kill you first.

Sundri: I do not care.

As Sundri looked around, she saw one sepoy approaching her. As he came close, Sundri recognised him as the Turk whom she had picked up in a wounded condition near that spot earlier and whom she had tended in the camp for a month till his recovery. She felt hopeful that this sepoy would come to her rescue and would certainly help her. As he faced Sundri, he saluted her, The other sepoy's stepped aside. He respectfully asked her about her health and well being. Sundri also politely asked him: "Who are these sepoy's and why have they surrounded me and spoken so rudely?"

The Turk replied: "O lady: you do not know who I am. Firstly, let me tell you about myself so that you can understand the situation. I am the servant of the Nawab (ruler) who had captured you from your village. Two months back I got wounded while fighting with a Sikh and nearing death when you passed by and took me to your camp. First I did not recognise you, but after a few days I realised that you were the same lady whom our Nawab had captured, but you were rescued by the Sikhs from the mosque. When I reached my home after my recovery due to your care, I spoke about it to the Nawab. He insisted that I should tell him the place where you live or bring you back to him for which I would be rewarded with five thousand rupees. If I did not do so, he would kill me. For many days, I wandered in the jungle and the forest but I could not find your habitation. Then I remembered that you had taken me wounded from this spot. So I thought that sooner or later you would pass this way. Therefore, I decided to stay at this spot. Since many days I and five sepoy's have been waiting for this ambush to capture you. God, the Merciful, be thanked for he has fulfilled my desire. Now I request you that you should show some concern for your youth and beauty. Why are you wasting your time with the homeless Sikhs? You work like a slave from morning till night and get no return. This is the time to enjoy the comforts of life. When will you have the best things

of life. Now this powerful Nawab will be your bonded Slave. You will live in a palace and lord over people. Enjoy life, come with me, there is a horse for you to ride upon."

Sundri felt nervous; her heart was depressed, but she spoke with confidence: "Is this the return for my service to you? Is this the compensation for my goodness?"

Turk: "I appreciate your goodness to me and I will not do anything sinister to harm you. I want to change you from a beggar to a princess, from an infidel to a believer. To fool the infidels is permissible. Now be quick and waste no time."

Sundri. "Though you may not even recite the *Namaz* (Muslim prayer) by mistake, but you will attribute all your tyranny to the command of your religion. O ungrateful person! Your values are absolutely wrong. Remember that your master will not get what he desires. I am a lioness and not a low or vulgar woman to be lured by temptation or greed. I shall give up my life, but not my faith."

Turk: "We very well know your obstinacy and arrogance. Now remember that unlike last time, we shall give you no respite. As soon as you reach the city, you will have to enter the Nawab's house."

Sundri: "Well, but who can dare to take me from here. First think and then speak. I regret once again that you have such a stony heart in which there is not an iota of gratitude or compassion. As a human being perpetrating this injustice, does it not cross your mind who is the one you are acting against. Listen to me attentively. If you leave me alone, God will bless you if you do not leave me; I will sacrifice my life. The choice is yours."

Turk: "I do not like both of them I like to make you the wife of my master." As soon as the Turk uttered these words, one sepoy grabbed Sundri by her left arm, but with great agility and promptness, this brave lady drew her dagger and pushed it deep into the neck of her grappler. It was almost a miracle, even lightning could not act faster. The wounded sepoy bled on the ground and he struggled between life and death.

Seeing this, the another sepoy caught her right hand in which she held the dagger, from behind and the third sepoy caught her from the waist and lifted her up; the fourth sepoy grabbed her left arm. Behind the trees was a buggy-like palanquin with a few bearers. Instantly Sundri was thrown into the palanquin the doors thereof were bolted and once again she became a prisoner of the Turks. In a moment, the tyrants vanished from the scene.

Soon after Sundri had left her brothers in the jungle and proceeded to the village, Sardar Sham Singh, Balwant Singh and other leaders assembled to consider the proposition that it was not safe to stay at the spot which had provided them shelter for some days. The rumours current at that time about Lakhu's depredations were horrifying. Right at this moment, a Sikh named Bijla Singh arrived in the camp. Sham Singh recognised him and after greeting him asked the news of the other Sikh guerrilla-warriors. Bijla Singh told him that the Khalsa had sent him to inform them that Lakhpatrai had wrought havoc among the Sikhs. Genocide was the order of the day. Sacred places were being desecrated and at many places, religious books had been set on fire and there was a great commotion in the entire country. For this reason, Sardar Jassa Singh, Hari Singh, Sukha Singh and other Sardars had decided to hold a meeting, because Lakhpat was scouring the marsh-lands of the Ravi river and other places of hiding of the Khalsa and therefore the Khalsa groups were leaving for the hills, and as such they should also proceed in that direction. The enemy troops were also proceeding in the direction of the present camp and it would not be possible for them to stay there anymore in peace.

Hearing this news, Sham Singh replied: "Well, Balwant Singh, tell the troops to wind up the camp. Now it is sunset and the Sikhs should be ready to march early at dawn, while the stars still shine in the sky. Bijla Singh, please tell me where the Khalsa is to hold the meeting."

Bijla Singh: "Sir, the Khalsa leaders are proceeding towards the dense forest near the bank of the lake of Kahnuwan."

Balwant Singh: "Do we proceed through the forests or on the high-way?"

Bijla Singh: "Let us proceed by the main road. The Turks of this region are ignorant of the situation. After about four or five days, the Turks will also reach here."

Balwant Singh: "All right".

After this, Balwant Singh went to the Free Kitchen and not finding Sundri there, began to inquire about her. Dharam Kaur informed him that Sundri had gone to the neighbouring village. Balwant Singh was unaware of the plight of his sister. He did not suspect any mischief. He left the Free Kitchen to inform his colleagues of the decision of the winding up of the camp. Then he visited Sardar Sham Singh. At that time Bijla Singh was narrating to those assembled the atrocities committed by Lakhpatrai against the Sikhs. He addressed them further as follows: When Lakhpatrai got the news that his brother-Jaspatrai in his expedition for the destruction of the Sikhs was opposed by the Sikhs and killed in battle, his face flushed with rage like a fire turning into a conflagration and he declared: "I shall prove myself a Khatri by destroying the very seed of the Sikhs. Then he wailed before the Nawab of Lahore and told him that during his regime, his brother Was killed by the Sikhs and nobody had come to his aid. He affirmed, "Now I have vowed to annihilate the Sikhs' totally." Then the Nawab replied: "If you can do this work, there is nothing better for you to achieve. You know that Yahya Khan is more serious than even his father to destroy the Sikhs. Take the artillery, ammunitions and the troops-whatever you require-and destroy the Sikhs root and branch.'- What more then did Lakhpat need? Thence-forward, he started the genocide of the Sikhs in Lahore. Any Sikh who happened to pass through any of the city-gates was captured and beheaded. This continued for two or three days and many Sikhs were killed. They were not soldiers but civilians. Simple young Sikh folk with long flowing hair who had come from villages to Lahore to attend to their daily business became victims of the wrath and sudden killing. Many were imprisoned and killed and some kept for conversion. Their women-folk waited for them at home. Not even one renounced his faith. They sacrificed their lives with smiles on their faces."

"It is reported that one day Bhai Harkirat Singh along with his wife and son reached Lahore. They did not know that atrocities were being committed in the city. As they were at some distance from the Golden Mosque, Lakhpat came riding from the opposite direction, When he saw this Sikh family, he shouted 'How come, Sikhs are walking in broad day-light in the city of Lahore? O God, when will the wasps' nest be destroyed? His sepoy captured the Sikh family. When they came near Diwan Lakhpatrai, the Sikh asked: "For what crime have I been arrested?"

Lakhpatrai answered: "It is a crime to be a Sikh and you have been arrested for it. Either give up your religion or be ready to die."

Harkirat Singh: "Well, do as you please. This injustice is intolerable but unfortunately there is no remedy for tyranny. Might is right. Here I am, ready to die."

Lakhpat was wonder-struck to see the martial stuff of which the Sikhs are made. They never cared for their lives.

It was almost the middle of the day, the market place was getting crowded. Numerous people were trembling with fear, but Lakhpat was adamant and repeated his order: 'Go and kill the boy first and then the lady and then this man. Alas! Rama! I should kill the cruel Sikhs. They killed my dear brother'. At this time, some one from the crowd shouted: 'Shame! Shame!' Lakhpat could not hear this insult and galloped away. These three persons were killed that day and their bodies left on the spot.

Sham Singh was much grieved to hear of Harkirat Singh's cold-blooded murder, because in those days there were very few scholars among the Sikhs preaching the Sikh tenets to them. Harkirat Singh was a great theologian, not an armchair one, but a real and true devotee. He was held in high esteem by the Sikh community. For this reason, Sham Singh felt this loss and declared in a rage: "We shall punish Lakhpat and set an example in the Punjab. He will have to suffer for killing an innocent and virtuous person so mercilessly."

Bijla Singh: "Sir, what more shall I tell you! Unknown and unprecedented calamities have befallen us; we feel our protective ramparts have become our enemies. We now have only the refuge of the Guru. He alone will protect us. Our enemies have left no stone unturned to destroy our race. Look, a few Sikhs came out of their hiding and mustering courage demanded the dead bodies of Bhai Harkirat Singh, his wife and his son and later cremated them. There were only eight or nine Sikhs. When they returned to the city, Lakhpat's sepoy who were prowling about captured them and butchered them to pieces.

Sham Singh: "Well, so what? Lakhpat is inviting his own doom. We heard yesterday that Lakhu first ordered the killing of his own Sikh employees. That was the night of the new moon. Diwan Kauramal, Kashmira Mal, Lachhi Ram, Surat Singh Diwan, Dile Ram, Hari Mal, Bahlu Mal and other leaders and representatives of the city went to Lakhu and pleaded the innocence of his employees and appealed for their release, but he paid no heed to them and got all his employees executed".

Bijla Singh: "This is quite true. Now listen to another sad tale. For some time, the Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple, Amritsar) was not under guard. One day a spy told Lakhpat that a Sikh celebration (*Gurpurab*) was to be held shortly when the Sikhs would gather in large numbers. There would be no better occasion than this to annihilate the Sikhs. Immediately Lakhpat contacted the Nawab of Lahore and made a scheme to accomplish this gory task, but this information reached Diwan Kaura Mal and Diwan Surat Singh. They tried their best to persuade Lakhpat to give up this scheme. They explained to him thus: "After all, Sikhs are our own kith and kin; they are like our limbs. To bear enmity to them is suicidal. If a Hindu gets another Hindu killed it will be calamitous. The Sikhs killed your brother; we also regret it, but consider the fact that he had a hand in the arrest of Bhai Mani Singh who was captured and cut to pieces, joint by joint, by the orders of Muslim ruler and for this reason the Sikhs were opposed to him. Well, if you have the grievance (of your brother's murder), it is legitimate for you to kill your brother's murderer in return, or to fight with the Sikh guerrillas. Innocent men, women and helpless children have given you no cause for their punishment. A pious and scholarly man like Bhai Harkirat Singh was murdered along with his wife and son in cold blood. What did you get out of it? Even now we have no man like him and moreover you still carry the dagger of revenge in your hand. Well let the past be forgotten and buried. Now stop this genocide and give up the idea of going to Amritsar for taking revenge on the Sikhs."

Lakhpat: "Brothers, you tell the truth, but the wearer knows where the shoe pinches. I feel the sudden loss of my brother. Who else can feel it like me?"

Surat Singh: "This is true. But by these killings you are not going to get your brother back alive."

Kaura Mal: 'O Diwan, just think for a while. Now is the time to stop killing. Enough havoc has already been done.'

Lakhpat: 'Alas! I can not bear my loss in patience. Do not get upset. I cannot reconcile myself and forget it.'

The two men argued with Lakhpat for a long time but he did not relent.

Thereafter these two persons (Kaura Mal and Surat Singh) hurried to Amritsar and reaching there informed the organisers that Lakhpat was determined to order mass massacre of the Sikhs. Any one who went to Harmander Sahib for the celebration would be killed. Therefore no one should enter the Harmander the next day. Then they posted their men outside the city on the highways, so that they might turn hack any Sikh who wanted to enter the city on the plea that entry to the Harmander Sahib had been officially banned. While the religious minded leaders accomplished the task of warning the people, Lakhpat, on the other hand, stealthily posted a large number of sepoys around the ample. He sat on the balcony of a nearby building and waited for further developments.

Early next morning, Diwan Kaura Mal and Surat Singh rode towards the temple to see what Lakhpat had decided to do, and when they approached the temple, the blissful music of the songs of the devoted Sikhs and their women were singing, fell gently like rain on their ears. Both the Diwans were distressed, as they knew Lakhpat's evil plans. At the same time,, they wondered what stuff are these Sikhs made of. They fear not death. Their faith is firm But the pity is that Lakhu is determined to bathe in the blood of these brave men.

Reflecting for a while, these two men tied their horses and turned towards the tents. They were now near the gate-way of the temple, when they saw a young woman whose beauty rivalled the full moon. She had a soiled cloth on her head and a nine-year child holding her fingers beside her. Both were reciting their prayers.

Advancing towards them, Diwan Kaura Mal asked them: "Where are you going?"

Lady(Bowing to him with folded hands): "We are going to Sri Darbar Sahib."

Surat Singh's face was flushed with indignation and he asked them: "From where have you come? Did no one stop you from coming here?"

With great confidence the lady answered: 'I am coming from Tung. Two men met me on the way and told me not to go to the temple, for we would be killed. So I turned back and changed my route and have come here stealthily through the fields.'

Kaura Mal: "Do you not want to live?"

Lady: "There is nothing dearer than one's life, hut ultimately it will also come to an end. Faith will outlive life. Therefore, it is not proper to sacrifice one's faith for preserving one's life."

Surat Singh: "If you would not have come to the temple, your religion would not have been endangered."

Lady: "Sir, to keep away on this *Gurpurab* celebration from the sight of the Guru is despicable. Where else can I find refuge? I do not care for my life, for it will not last long and will ultimately part my company, but my religion will be with me forever. When all others leave me, my faith will abide with me."

Surat Singh: "O Lady! How come you have so much courage? Your youth is meant for enjoying comforts. Why have you become too deeply religious-to the point of renunciation-at this age?"

Lady: "Guru Sahib has caught me by the arm and made me his devotee. Well, I know nothing, yet the murder of Harkirat Singh is fresh in my mind."

Kaura Mal: "That poor fellow was also killed. He is dead and gone."

Lady: "My God! Do the saints ever die? They return to their homes. Who of woman born can kill the saints?"

Kaura Mal: "Well, are you bent upon going to Harmander?"

Lady: "As the Lord wills!"

Kaura Mal: "Why are you not accompanied by your husband?"

Lady: "Sir, he is dead and gone to God's Abode."

Surat Singh: "Lady, listen to us and go back and save your skin and that of your child. Lakhpat is sitting over there and he will never let you go back alive."

Lady: "Well, you keep away."

Surat Singh: "Have you no pity for this child?"

Lady: "I have compassion for him and therefore I have brought him with myself otherwise I should have left him at home. I thought I would not go to Heaven alone; I should take apart and parcel of myself also to that holy place. After my death, possibly he may give up his faith; he is of a tender age."

Kaura Mal: "O God! It is marvellous! What is that stuff of which the hearts of the Sikhs are made! O the pity of it! Will Lakhpat really kill these pious people?"

Lady: "This is the blessing of Amrit (Sikh baptism) and the grace of the Guru. If you love the Sikhs so much as appears from your actions, please prevent Lakhpat from committing this sin, and fight against him. If there is any problem, inform the Khalsa living in any of the nearby Jungles."

This thing appealed to the two Diwans very much. They could not prevent the lady from attending the celebration which she felt was right. She began reciting her' prayers and proceeded to Harmander Sahib.

Both Diwan Kaura mal and Diwan Surat Singh having decided on this course of action-that they would protect the Sikhs even at the cost of their lives-reached their camp and collecting twenty-five to thirty riders, went to Lakhpat and explained to him to stop his planned massacre.

It was agreed that Lakhu should have some more time for thinking over the matter. Later on, Lakhu told his commander in private: 'I am going and I will issue an order that the Sikhs should not be killed, hut you should come hack and secretly deploy some of your sepoy's so that they would capture and kill the Sikhs.'

The fact was that Lakhu wanted to hide his deception. Along with his troops he left the place in company of Diwan Kauramal and Surat Singh. The two Diwans feeling assured by Lakhu's promise went to their homes. But soon thereafter Lakhu marched back with fifty of his horsemen to the Harmander. The prayers at the temple had just ended. It was now time for the dispersal of the congregation. Some actually had left the temple, while others were about to leave. Lakhu's sepoy's rounded up all of them including women and children and cut them to pieces like carrots. About noontime the news of the massacre reached Surat Singh. He and Kauramal reached the place where the corpses lay piled up. They wept bitterly when they saw the gory scene. Soon getting together a few men and collecting some fuel, they cremated the bodies on the spot. That very day they sent their secret messengers to the Sikh Jathedars (Leaders) to be vigilant and cautious. They sent an urgent warning to them that Lakhu was after their blood, and that they should take steps to protect themselves. They also sent some money to the Sikh groups for their expenses.

Night fell when Bijla Singh completed the narration of these tragedies. The Khalsa had completed their dinner. Balwant Singh went to the Free Kitchen but did not find Sundri there. He was in a state of great anxiety. A strong feeling of apprehension passed through his mind. He felt certain that some new misfortune had overtaken her. He took Dharam Kaur and about twenty armed riders with himself and proceeded to the village. The night was dark and the roads uneven and craggy. With great difficulty, the Sikhs climbed over the hillock. They saw a Pathan's corpse lying on the footpath. As they searched the spot, they found a dagger, which Balwant Singh recognised as the one belonging to his sister. Now he was clear in his mind that his sister had been overtaken by some calamity. Promptly they entered the village and calling the villagers to the market place, made detailed enquiries from them. Balwant Singh was told that at sunset, a palanquin under the guard of five or seven Turks had passed through the village. Hearing this, Balwant Singh followed in the dark that way for four to six miles but did not find Sundri. Then they all returned to the camp and called some leading members of the group for consultation. They knew that they had also to shift the camp early morning.

A mystic mendicant is walking on the road; he wears a long shirt from which rags dangled; he has a begging bowl in hand and a loose sheet covering his thighs and legs. He has a pony which he sometimes rides and sometimes leads by the hand; sometimes he sings a song in Arabic and sometimes in Persian; sometimes he sings lines from the romance of Heer-Ranjha and occasionally verses of Guru Nanak, but one line which he utters with great devotion is:

'In what lane shall I find my beautiful Lord?'

As he was going towards the river, a Muslim met him and said; 'Sir, do not go thither. Both the banks of the ford are guarded by the Sikhs, for their troops are crossing the river; you should not go in that direction, lest you might be ground like worms in grams in a mill.'

Fakir (mendicant): 'O, the damned Sikhs! Where shall I go then?'

Man: 'Sir, go along the lower footpath and then you will reach a spot where two or three boatmen are hiding. They will take you across the river in their boat.'

Fakir: "Has any one else gone that way?"

Man: "O man of God! Yes, a little while ago a Moghul along with his family in a palanquin went that way. I am standing at this spot so that if any pious man wants to go by ferry, I may guide him to a suitable crossing site so that he may avoid the Sikhs."

Fakir: "There used to be some sepoy's for guarding the ferry-service."

Man: "The Sikhs on arrival imprisoned them."

Fakir (mendicant) got so scared when he heard the name of Sikhs that he jumped on his pony and galloped away to the small pathway and soon reached the little known ferry point on the river. He saw a boat fully loaded and therefore, shouted to the boatman: "For God's sake, take me on your boat."

In that boat there was a Muslim Chief and the palanquin of his wife, along with horses and servants. The Chief paid no attention to the Fakir's entreaties. However, boatmen are generally afraid of religious mendicants, because they firmly believe that boats capsize on account of the curses of such men. In short, on the intervention of the boatman, the Fakir got a seat; he pushed the pony to a corner of the boat. The boatman unmoored the boat and set it afloat.

At this time a few clouds could be seen in the sky and a gentle breeze blew. The Fakir in his own frenzy began reciting verses of the Quran. In that excitement, he also sang the following line: "In what lane shall I find my beautiful Lord?"

The river's stillness, the floating clouds, the pleasant whiffs of breeze and the Fakir's rapturous melody produced a magical effect. All people felt happy with the Fakir. The Muslim Chief sat still, listening to the songs and began waving his head joyfully, but strangely enough his *begum* (wife) in the palanquin was overcome by sorrow and heaved such a sad and low sigh that the Fakir got nervous and began to recite again the Quranic verse ('Lahaul wala') invoking God's protection. When the Muslim Chief observed this, he said to the Fakir: 'O Sir, it will all go well. You keep singing the last verse.'

On hearing the remark, the Fakir sang the last verse again, and the begum again moaned and whispered an audible: 'Alas!'

At this moment, the Fakir stopped singing and told the Muslim Chief: 'You are a *Kafir* (an infidel) at heart. You are ill-treating your wife.'

God has never ordained that one should treat one's wife harshly, The Chief began to give explanations, but the Fakir did not listen to him. His ears were turned towards the palanquin and his face towards the Chief. How could now and then hear a groan coming from inside the palanquin. The Fakir closed his eyes and then for some moments he sat like a Yogi in a trance. When he opened his eyes he said to the Chief: 'Sir, the lady in the palanquin is not your wife; she is a strange woman: her hands and feet are tied and I have known all this through my mystic lore.' The Chief was taken aback and respectfully touched the Fakir's feet and said: 'you are a messenger of God. You are a rare mystic.'

By and by, the wind began to howl; the waves rose up furiously; the boat drifted up and down. Now all people touched the Fakir's feet and requested him to save them from disaster and prevent the boat from capsizing.

The Fakir addressed the Chief: 'look, the lady inside the palanquin should be freed; take her out and untie her limbs. Throw the palanquin in the river. Throw all the things in the boat overboard except my pony and your horse.' The Chief ordered accordingly.

Life is dear to every one; the Fakir's order was carried out. On seeing the face of the lady who came out of the palanquin, the Fakir repeated: 'Quick, remove her fetters; she has the face of a pious lady; be quick.'

Now the wind became mild and the boat being lighter floated on steadily till it reached the bank. All got down at a spacious spot. The four carriers and a rider were sent to the nearest habitation to bring another palanquin and to arrange the supply of horses and foodstuffs. The Muslim Chief sat down alone reclining on a pillow, and kept his waist belt on the carpet in front of him.

The lady sitting opposite the Muslim Chief was drowned in a sea of sorrow. On the other side was the Fakir who started singing once again. After he had sung a litany, the lady interrupting him said: "Sir, you seem to be a man of God and a person of compassion, I want, justice."

Fakir replied: "Well, tell me about yourself."

Then the lady related the entire story, namely that the Amir (Chief) was once lying wounded in a jungle and she tended him more than a mother for over a month. Now he had arrested her and was taking her to his home. The Amir, however, gave a different interpretation of events: that he wanted to compensate her for her services and therefore wanted to make her the wife of his own master and thereby raise her social status. After hearing both the versions, the Fakir smiled and said: O lady, you are a liar; the Amir has told the truth."

When the lady heard this unfair decision, her eyes became red with anger. The Fakir was lost in his thoughts, while the Amir was waving his head in a frenzy. In her extreme rage, the lioness-Sundri promptly drew the sword from her sheath and stood up with the naked sword as if Durga had risen to destroy the demons. The Amir was stunned and putting his trembling hands against his face wanted to find some easy way of escape when the Durga-like Sundri dealt him such a sword-stroke with both her hands that right from his shoulder to his waist, his body was cut-like to position of a Hindu sacred thread-and he fell to the ground, hovering between life and death. The lion-hearted lady threw away the sword and untying the Amir's horse from the tree-trunk, mounted it and turned the reins toward the upward course of the river. The Fakir rode on his pony and shouted to the lady: "O Sundri, O Sundri, stop; I had come here in search of you." But once bitten, twice-shy Sundri, the brave Sundri, the pious Sundri disappeared from view in a moment.

The Fakir after covering some distance removed his sheet, which he was wearing over his drawers; then he took off his gown, which had a shirt beneath along with a sword and a belt. He removed his head cloth and tied it like a turban and he appeared altogether a different man. From a Muslim Fakir, he was transformed into Bijla Singh. Soon he reached the ferry where the Khalsa had just crossed. Balwant Singh and other Sikhs who had returned disappointed after scouring twenty miles in search of Sundri learnt from Bijla Singh about Sundri and her recent exploit. Balwant Singh and his ten Sikhs proceeded in the direction suggested by Bijla Singh in search of Sundri. The remaining Sikh troops marched towards the north-western side of the river.

Lakhpatrai was so much engrossed heart and soul in the task of liquidating the Sikhs that he regarded the genocide of the Sikhs as the only way to his salvation. Through the narratives of Bijla Singh, the readers have learnt of Lakhpat's atrocities. But that was not all. He left no stone unturned to destroy the very seed of the Khalsa. Noticing his serious efforts and continuous hard work, the Muslim rulers were convinced that he would out-Herod, Herod and efface all the vestiges of the very existence of the Khalsa.

The whole of the Punjab was in a state of turmoil and conflagration. In fact after the devastating attack of Nadir Shah, Khan Bahadur continued the policy of genocide of the Sikhs from 1796 to 1801 Bikrami (1739 to 1744 AD). The chaudhris (chiefs) of every village were ordered that if they found any Sikh anywhere, they should have him killed and his house and property confiscated. Mobile troops were engaged in searching and capturing and killing Sikhs. Today one shudders to read the accounts of these killings in the pages of history. The atrocities suffered bravely by the

Khalsa are beyond description; our ears can never bear to hear them. Both rural and urban Sikhs were massacred. Espionage was the order of the day. The captors of the Sikhs were amply rewarded. But the brave Khalsa was never cowed. They kept their high spirits and the religious fervour alive, by following in their daily lives, the programme of religious services and practice of remembering God as ordained by the Gurus. Those captured died smilingly. They left the villages to live in the wilderness and faced unbearable and indescribable hardships for the preservation of the Sikh way of life. The groups of Sikhs, which were trapped by the roving army, were brought to Lahore and tortured to death one and all, men, women and children. Some were put on the fly-wheel and sawn to death. The wells of Lahore were filled with the heads of Sikhs and the heads of the dead were also piled high into towers. During those days, Massa Rangar was desecrating Darbar Sahib at Amritsar when Mahtab Singh came to him and cut off his head, though he was fully guarded.

A current story is that one day the Nawab of Lahore asked an astrologer the reason for the Sikhs' supreme sacrifices and refusal to change their religion. He replied that the Sikhs get baptised with *Amrit* from their Guru who was a great prophet. After drinking *Amrit* they become immortal and wholly transformed; after taking a bath in the Amritsar Tank, their vitality and courage are refreshed and renewed. On hearing this, the Nawab ordered that the Sikhs were prohibited from bathing in the Amritsar Tank. But those arrogant fools did not know that the Sikhs are not cheap vessels made out of common flesh and blood; their minds are strong as steel and hard as solid stone. The Khalsa stealthily continued to visit Amritsar and bathe in the tank and recite prayers at night. Many times these bathing Sikhs while standing on those sacred steps—the steps and the court-yard of the temple had idols of Hindu deities, but later in 1704 were removed, since they could not be a part of Harmandar Sahib—on those holy steps and while reciting the *Japji* became the targets of the bullets of the military guards and attained martyrdom, but did not give up their recitation of prayers. On observing this situation, one Turk official once declared in a joke: "If they are Singhs (lions) they should bathe during the day; why do they come like jackals at night?" When the Sikhs heard this remark, they were inflamed with rage.

One Sikh named Sukha Singh used to live in a village. On account of the tyranny of Turks, his parents had cut off his hair when he was in an unconscious state. Sukha Singh could not bear this disgrace and decided to commit suicide. A Sikh told him: "If you want to die, die as a martyr for a good cause; why do you have to die in vain?" Then Sukha Singh came to Sardar Sham Singh and joined the Sikh guerrilla force. He received the baptism of *Amrit* and became such a great warrior that his heroic acts became famous among the community. This brave man being piqued by the derogatory remark of the Turkish official mentioned above, one day bathed in the tank at Amritsar during day-time. The guards challenged him but he fought and decimated many of them and escaped alive. This bold act of Sukha Singh was too humiliating for the rulers. They filled up the Amritsar Tank with clay and made it impossible for any one to bathe there. In 1702 Bikrami (1645 A.D.) Yayha Khan took over the administration (of Lahore) on Khan Bahadur's death and he surpassed his father in oppressing the Sikhs.

This was the most miserable time for the Sikhs. They were hunted down everywhere. Even the docile citizens became hostile. They led an isolated and precarious existence.

Now let me continue the story. When Sundri escaped riding a horse and had gone quite a long distance, she came across no Khalsa-group and she did not know their location. Every moment she was apprehensive that her enemies might be following her; she regretted that her dagger had been left in the stomach of the sepoy whom she had killed on the hill and that she had thrown her sword away after killing the ungrateful Amir on the riverbank. She had now no weapon with her and if any new trouble arose, how would she fare the situation? She felt imbued with a fresh moral force that

Guru Gobind Singh had saved her from such ordeals. He would help her at all times. So she should not worry at all. It was remarkable that the Sikh lady had such a strong heart and self-confidence.

Hungry and weary of travel, exhausted by the rigours of the weeks spent in jail, bewildered by the separation from her brother and wandering alone in remote deserted places, Sundri was consoling herself and supported her frustrated heart with noble thoughts and that the great Guru was her true support everywhere. Suddenly she saw a lake full of clear water from a distance, and birds of different colours playing on the bank. Charmed by the placid water, Sundri automatically stopped, tied her horse to a tree trunk and had a quick bath and drank some water. Then she recited the prayers (*Japji* and *Hazare-de Shabad*). Thereafter she recited other prayers and became so engrossed that she appeared like a statue. Ducks and storks and many kinds of waterfowls began to move fearlessly around her. Sundri sat absorbed in her meditation, repeating God's name for some time. However, she felt it were only a few moments. Her mind was free from tension or sorrow and was enjoying inner bliss. Absorbed in the Holy Name, Sundri was either preoccupied with her innerself or she felt the near-presence of the Guru with whom her consciousness was linked.

From this ecstatic state, Sundri gained her consciousness when she was disturbed by the sound of bullet-shots. When she opened her eyes, she saw ten to twenty riders shooting birds on the other side of the lake. Their shots hit a ruddy goose nearby. Sundri felt nervous and jumped on her horse. She recognised the Turks and with them was the Muslim ruler who had caused so much harassment to her earlier. Sundri trembled, but gathering her wits and mustering courage, she spurred the horse and galloped away.

On the other hand, the hunters were surprised. They thought a king-swan had appeared out of a flock of ducks. Much amazed, but with the intention of collecting quickly the hunted fowls. they followed in that direction. They saw Sundri running away: they chased her and surrounded her. The Muslim ruler -Amir- recognised Sundri and expressed his surprise: "May God be thanked who has arranged my meeting with you in such a manner. I thank God a million times!" So saying he became dizzy and unconscious on his horseback. His companions stood amazed and gave him all support. Sundri felt sorry for him, but at the same time she was tense, surrounded by enemy riders she faced a difficult situation. After a while, the ruler opened his eyes and said: "How is it that you took birth among the Kafirs (infidels)? How brave are you? How confidently have you been riding your horse? How outstanding are your capabilities? How superior to those of men! Undoubtedly, you are an expert and worthy of becoming my wife, but I do not know why you are so scared of me? I am also handsome. Perhaps, you desire to move about freely like the deer frisking in the forest and in my mansion you will be confined in Purdah (veil). Yes, you are right. You have understood the situation correctly. Don't be afraid, I shall give you some freedom. I swear on the Prophet that I love you from the bottom of my heart. I am a poet and not an unlettered villager. Let us go to the city." He smiled as he finished the last word.

At this moment, Sundri was not listening to the words of the Amir: she was praying to God with closed eyes: "O Timeless God! Come out of these tree-trunks and protect my honour. I have no helper except You. Be compassionate to me." This sort of prayer rose deep from her heart and reached the Almighty. In this prayerful mood, she saw a vision of some Sikhs riding towards her, and from heaven the Guru in his splendour was beckoning them in her direction. In her ecstatic state, she shouted to them: "Oh dear brothers; come quickly, just this way." Her words were so shrill that even the horses were frightened. Her eyes now opened. She actually saw a few riders coming from a distance who accelerated their speed on hearing her wail of agony. In a moment, they reached the spot. There was a fight between the Sikhs and the Moghuls. Two Moghuls were killed and the rest ran away. The honour of Sundri was saved by God: "In every age, God protects the honour of his saints." Sundri and her Sikh brothers dismounted and shed many tears of joy; the

tears

continued

to

flow.

(THE SMALL HOLOCAUST)

The platoons of guerrillas under the command of Sardar Sham Singh had set up a camp almost ten miles away from the river. The Sikhs were preparing their meals. The Sardar was waiting for Balwant Singh in the open yard. Suddenly Balwant Singh along with his virtuous sister (Sundri) arrived there safely. Seeing Sundri, Sham Singh was overjoyed; he patted her on her head and seated her next to himself. In a moment, this good news reached the entire camp and all the Sikhs came one by one and greeted their sister Sundri. Though Sundri felt strong on account of her unflinching faith she had emerged a little pale and exhausted out of this ordeal. This fact was noticed by Dharam Kaur who deeply loved Sundri. Well, Sundri and the *Sarbat Khalsa* (Sikh army) took meals together, and after a while closed the camp and marched towards Kahnuwan, where they were joined by their brothers in the jungle.

Before the arrival of Sardar Sham Singh, Sardar Karora Singh, Hari Singh, Baba Dip Singh 'Shahid', Nawab Kapur Singh, Sukha Singh, Jassa Singh, Jai Singh, Charhat Singh, Gurdayal Singh, Hira Singh, Gurbaksh Singh and other Sikh leaders of the Khalsa organisation, who were great warriors and ideal Sikhs had reached here. When Sardar Sham Singh arrived, they met him with great love and respect, much more than what exists between real brothers. The sad story and the dedicated service and the reputation of Sundri came to the notice of one and all. She also felt happy in their company.

That day the entire Khalsa had assembled in their hour of extreme difficulty but their mutual regard was so great and sincere that it bears no comparison to what is found in the world. In fact they regarded themselves as children of the same parents, and so they were all united as brothers. No one bore any grudge to another and all of them were inspired by the love and welfare of the Sikh community. Big and small, one and all were united as equals and did not harbour any discrimination. They had the love of the Guru at heart and all were immersed in the spirit of sacrifice for the benefit of the panth. All of them loved Gurbani and recited it loudly. They had Sardars (leaders) more for guidance than for purposes of rigid discipline. Good conduct was self-imposed. They were all warriors and yet they held their Jathedars (Chiefs) in high esteem. No one dared disobey the orders of the Jathedar.

One night the Sikhs held their assembly and adopted a Resolution (*Gurmatta*) about their plans. It was accepted by all as the command of the Guru. At this time, Bijla Singh, the spy conveyed the latest news that Lakhpat with about 100,000 infantry and artillery was hurrying in the direction of their camp. The Khalsa deliberated on the strength of their army; they knew their total number would be between twenty to twenty-five thousand, but estimated the enemy strength in lakhs. Moreover, the Khalsa had no regular or adequate provisions or supplies and there was unsatisfactory arrangement for food and water. It was a big problem. What should then be done? No one could adequately commend the maturity of ideas, arguments and discussions held at that time. The wisdom that they had gathered from their daily hardships and sufferings, and the courage with which the Gurus' ideals had always inspired them and provided the incentive for their practical resourcefulness had turned them into warriors. At that time the Sikhs had great love for Gurbani and derived from it inspiration for living; their lives were both practical and ideal; they had extreme love for the Panth (the Sikh Community): there was no selfishness among them for personal gains; they would sacrifice themselves for religious causes and advancement of the Panth.

That night, when they assembled for adopting a *Gurmatta* they neither acted as a Committee of factions nor as an arena for the cockfight of selfish well-wishers: it was neither a conspiracy to ruin

a brother for sheer enmity, nor a get-together for show of personal glory. The assemblies of those days followed the mature traditions of the true Sikhs, which Guru Gobind Singh had taught to his dear sons. It is a matter of pity that the fickle-minded Sikhs of today have forsaken those traditions. The destiny of the Sikhs depended on the decisions taken in those critical times through the *Gurmatta*. If at that time, there had been Sikhs like what they are today-party-oriented and faction-minded-God knows what would have been the future of the Sikhs! The Gurus-the guides of the Panth- are always with us and they help the true Sikhs at all times.

In short, the decision of the assembly or the *Gurmatta* that night was that the entire army of the Khalsa might spread out and control the whole jungle of Kahnawan and its brushwood. They acted on it and took with themselves whatever food and water they could collect. The subsequent supply depended on the hunting of the birds and beasts available near the lake and in the forest, and the booty acquired from the enemy. Such was the department set up for the commissariat of the Khalsa. Rifles, arrows, clubs, spears and swords were the weaponry; the forest was the fortress of the Khalsa: and their mutual love and Guru's support were their sources of power.

Lakhpat was planning to surround the Sikhs from all sides. Running from their places of hiding, the Sikhs converged on this spot.

Lakhpat set his camp at the nearest point. The jungle was so thick that it was difficult to penetrate it. The jungle was dense and abounded with thorny trees. Its pathways were known to none except the Guru's brave Sikhs. It was not merely a jungle but a fortress of the Khalsa where even the guns of Lakhpat were of no avail. Camping on the outskirts of the jungle, Lakhpat waited for a chance to attack, but unfortunately got none. The brave Sikhs, following their guerrilla tactics, used to emerge out of the Jungle at dead of night and attack the forces of Lakhpat. They decimated thousands of his soldiers, looted their bullets, rifles, weapons, food and fodder: before dawn they vanished in the jungle. Their rations of food and medical aid were limited, but even so Sundri, Dharam Kaur and traditional physicians (*vaids*) with the Sikh soldiers were able to bandage and take care of their wounded brothers.

The silent but mighty attacks of Sikhs were so sudden and devastating that the enemy's forces were confounded. If they reinforced a place which they thought the Sikhs would attack, then the latter would ignore or avoid that point; they would attack a weak spot like lighting. Bijla Singh and other Sikh spies would under different disguises enter the enemy's lines, but the enemy could not detect or apprehend them. One day a Sikh spy was caught; Lakhpat got him tied to a tree and burnt alive. That night Bijla Singh alone carried out a severe reprisal. At mid-night he found an opportunity to set fire to the enemy's arsenal and then he slipped away. That fire did extensive damage to the enemy's armoury, and ammunition worth many thousands of rupees was destroyed. The explosion of the arsenal took a heavy toll of the enemy; many soldiers were killed and many more were grievously wounded. Next day Lakhu got a letter to the following effect: "The Sikhs are fighting for the good of the subjects, while you as an oppressor are destroying your own troops. Beware of God's punishment."

Quite some time passed in this manner. Lakhpat's army suffered a great loss and his expenditure increased tremendously, yet no one cared, for he had the emperor's treasury to support his expedition. On the other hand, the food and water of the Khalsa was exhausted; the birds of the lake were also finished off and there was no animal left in the jungle for hunting. Thousands of soldiers had to be fed but the animals do not multiply so soon. Even the scanty supply of jungle fruits came to an end. The ammunition had been exhausted. On the other hand, Lakhpat's troops were kept on the alert at night; during the nightly raids the Sikhs got very little; the weather became severe. It was a very critical period, but the Khalsa never lost their spirits, and with the hope in the Guru survived on roots of trees.

One night, while the Sikh council was in session, Bhai Binod Singh arrived. He declared: "The Guru has appeared through the trees." Karora Singh asked him: "Tell us, how?" He answered: "Your provision supplier (*Modi*) has arrived, Diwan Kaura Mal has sent adequate supplies."

Sham Singh: "But where are the supplies?"

Binod Singh: "Let me tell you. Diwan Kaura Mal gets all the news from the Lahore government. Hearing of the difficult food-situation of the Sikhs, he has despatched cartloads of wheat flour and other commodities under the charge of a Bania (merchant). The latter is proceeding towards the foot of the hills. He has camped about two miles away from the lake. Nobody knows who he is." Hearing this, Sardar Kapur Singh said: "This brave man-Kauramal-is our great good friend. He always comes to our aid in difficulties. He is a real well wisher of the Sikhs. Being such a big official in the government of our enemies, he loves us as much as the body loves the soul." Sher Singh declared: "This man has a great foresight and anticipates correctly. Judged by the spirit and character of the Khalsa, he feels that the Sikhs will one day definitely rule over the land and, therefore, desires that they should get strong, and quickly end the rule of the tyrants."

Sham Singh: "Probably you do not know all. Kauramal is a devoted Sikh of the Guru, a *Sahajdhari* (slow adopter) Sikh, a liberal Sikh. He lives in this fashion (unbaptised and without hair) so that he may be able to help the Panth in difficult times. That is why he is called *Mitha Mal* (sweet person) in place of *Kaura Mal* (bitter person). He is a true friend of the Sikhs and does not want the foreign Pathans and raiders to consolidate their hold on the country."

Binod Singh: "May I tell you one of his acts of bravery, O brother. Shahpur or may be it is Nazimpur- I cannot recollect the exact name-was attacked by royal army three times; every time it returned defeated. The fourth time, Kaura Mal was given this charge and he led the expedition. His troops camped about four miles away from the city. Kaura Mal, disguised as *fakir* (mendicant) went to the city alone. The ruler of the city and two other persons were playing chess in a garden. Kaura Mal went there but none of them either responded or even looked at him. After standing for a minute or so, Kaura Mal suddenly jumped on the bedstead (*Palang*) and knocked down the ruler (*Nizam*) and sitting on his chest put his dagger against his chest. All were amazed at the daring art of the fakir. Then Kaura Mal declared in a rage: "Listen to me carefully. If any one attacks me, I will kill the ruler (*Nizam*) and therefore your attack on me will be in vain. You know Diwan Kaura Mal has led the expedition against you."

The *Diwan* (Minister) of the ruler (*Nizam*) replied: "So what does it matter?" Kaura Mal is camping four miles away. Tomorrow, we shall fight and defeat him." The *fakir* said: "Now the fact of the matter is that if you even touch me, I shall thrust my dagger into the ruler's chest. I have already placed my weapon there; I have just to push it in. If I die, I care not for my sacrifice for Diwan Kaura Mal. Thousands of men like me are waiting at his door. Now, you must carry this bedstead-as it is with your *Nizam*-to the door of the tent of Diwan Kaura Mal. There you talk to him. I do not want anything else. I give you my word that I shall bring you back safe to this place and nobody will ever harm you."

So great was the effect of this sudden attack by the *fakir* and the charisma of Kaura Mal's personality that none of them could think of any thing. Overcome by fear, they immediately carried the bedstead as instructed to the camp. As they approached the tent of Diwan Kaura Mal, the fakir jumped into the tent. Changing his dress and with great pomp, he came out to meet the ruler and his associates. He greeted the ruler and led him with great respect inside his tent. The army had by then surrounded the tent. In short the Diwan's sweetness of tongue and persuasive diplomacy had such a great effect that the ruler agreed to sovereignty of the Lahore government and made a treaty on those terms and paid his tribute in cash. The ruler then inquired about the spy who had caught him

so helplessly in the garden and without shedding a drop of blood brought him to the Diwan, for he would like to reward the spy with the grant of a village. The Diwan told him that Kaura Mal could not be brought into his presence Thus the expedition was quite successful. The reputation of Diwan Kaura Mal rose high because he had won a victory without shedding even a drop of blood. Dip Singh 'Shahid' said: "This is an event of great diplomacy, courage and glory. The stupid Lakhu has none of these qualities. He is a tyrant and an obstinate man."

Binod Singh: "Diwan Kaura Mal, on his return from the expedition, did justly decide an unusual dispute. There were two sisters-in-law; one had a buffalo and the other had a sheep. The first sister-in-law was a spendthrift and she never cared to save any milk or butter. The second sister-in-law was prudent and she hoarded half a Kacha maund of butter, which she made out of surplus sheep milk. The first sister-in-law stole that butter and used it. When the second sister-in-law came to know of it, she quarrelled with her. Thereafter they came to the ruler but all said it was impossible for a woman with a buffalo to steal the butter of another lady having just a sheep. Secondly how could half a Kacha maund of butter (about 18 kilos) be collected from the milk of one sheep? However, no wise man ever investigated deeply this case. One day Diwan Kaura Mal while on tour camped near this village. The truthful sister-in-law greatly agitated came to him and cried out for justice. The Diwan told them to go to the nearby lake and bring five lotus flowers each for him. He also sent a man after them with instruction that he should not allow the women to wash their feet. When both of them returned, the Diwan ordered that two earthen vessels of equal size be brought and the one vessel full of water be given to each of them separately and they should wash their feet and appeal before him. When they came back, the Diwan looked at the feet of the women and decided that the claim of the second sister-in-law owning the sheep was true, while the defence of the first sister-in-law owning the buffalo was false. People were much surprised by this decision."

Those who knew both the women well realised that the woman with the sheep was truthful. The Diwan became famous throughout the country for the dispensation of justice. The Diwan decided the matter by looking carefully at the feet of both women. He gave his verdict in favour of the woman with the sheep because he found her feet were very clean and even noted that there was still some water left in her vessel, while the woman with the buffalo had completely emptied her vessel and her feet were full of mud in certain places.

Balwant Singh remarked: "Really this is a unique way of dispensing justice. Yes, Binod Singh, we have to plan how to get all the rations and water to this place?"

Binod Singh: "I and Bijla Singh have executed a secret plan. It is this that Bijla Singh disguised as an astrologer met Lakhu and throwing a dice predicted that the Khalsa would attack his forces from the South at midnight. Lakhu, therefore, collected all his troops to the South and kept his artillery ready for action. He had withdrawn his forces from the North and therefore there was a gap of half a mile between the bank of the lake and his troops. Now if the Khalsa musters courage and picks up the bags of food grains quickly passing hand to hand from that spot and all the provisions can be brought to the jungle before sunrise, then it will be all to our advantage. Moreover the Bania will make a complaint during the following day to Lakhu that the Sikhs have looted his supplies. In this way, no one will suspect that Diwan Kaura Mal had sent the rations.

Now we must play a trick so that Lakhu may expect that the Khalsa is heading towards the South: and one platoon should actually proceed to the South at midnight and fire five to ten volleys of bullets from that side and retreat. Firstly this will prove that the prediction of the astrologer has proved to be true and secondly the artillery of Lakhu will be rendered useless and thirdly Bijla Singh has to set fire tonight to the tent where torches are stocked, These have to be destroyed first so that at the time of the attack, there will be total darkness and therefore the enemy will not be able

to distinguish friends from foes, and as such, many of the enemy's troops will be killed by mutual slaughter.

All commended this plan and strategy of attack of Binod Singh. One platoon proceeded to the South of the jungle; it took shelter in a secluded place and cleared a part of the jungle for retreat. The enemy was awake. They shouted: "The Sikhs have come"; and so there was a lot of tumult. The Sikhs kept quiet for a while and then fired a volley of shots with the result that the excitement increased. In this way creating chaos among the enemy, the Sikh platoon kept them engaged on this side but did not come out to fight. On the other hand, many well-equipped Sikhs formed a group on the bank of the river late in the night, and passed on the bags of rations and other supplies to their camp in the jungle. As soon as it was sunrise, Lakhu found many of his sepoy's dead and the Bania also made a complaint about the looting of his provisions by the Sikhs during the night.

In short the Khalsa subsisted for many days on the supplies sent by Kaura Mal; subsequently the provisions were exhausted and the Khalsa had nothing to eat. Many consultations were held by the Sikh leaders; nights were spent in anxiety and in making temporary arrangements, but there was no real solution in sight. Then Lakhu got the trees cut; at many spots, he set the brushwood on fire and after clearing the way fired his guns. In this connection, Rattan Singh Bhangu-the author of *Prachin Panth Prakabh* wrote: "Then Diwan. Lakhpat called the road-labourers and got the roads constructed. He destroyed the trees and set them on fire and clearing the way, fired his guns. The Sikhs were much harassed; they could not find anything to eat. The hungry Sikhs moved on and ultimately came out of the jungle hide-outs."

Considering the pros and cons of the situation, the Khalsa decided that instead of dying through starvation, it would be much better to fight with the enemy and perhaps seek an escape. Having decided on this course of action, the Sikh troops marched in the upper direction at midnight and before sunrise proceeded towards the hills. Lakhu kept a hot chase of the Sikhs and also wrote to the Hill Rajas to capture them.

The Sikhs now marched towards the hills. Some proceeded through the jungles and some through open fields and taking some sort of the shelter reached the bank of Ravi river, With great courage they crossed the river. Those who reached the other bank proceeded further, while the Turkish troops followed them. The Sikhs had no time either for a halt or encampment. Bhangu wrote in this connection as follows:

"The Sikhs had no chance to set up a camp;
They marched day and night;
The Sikhs had nothing with them;
In fact they were isolated;
The ammunition was not available;
How could the Sikhs then fight?
The weapons got blunted in the fighting;
The Sikhs could not - sleep either during the day or night;
The bows were broken and lost;
The arrows were exhausted without chance of fresh supply;
The spears remained stuck in the enemy's body;
The makers of weapons could not be found in the jungle;
Without grain, the horses were enfeebled;
Without clothes the soldiers' bodies got sunburns;
They had no food to eat;
Even water could not be had there."

In short:

"The army was half-dead through walking
They were expecting death by starvation;
Both the calamities joined hands;
To ruin the Khalsa bands."

The Sikhs were looking towards the hills expecting that the Hindu Chieftains would give them some food and comfort. They marched in the direction of Basoli. Some Sikhs reached Basoli only to meet death.

Bhangu wrote thus:

"Many hill-men gathered at Basoli;
The Sikhs thought that they would offer them some relief;
Some of the Sikhs approached them; They were killed by the hillmen."

In this way the Sikhs who had proceeded to Parol Kathua were either looted or murdered; those who survived returned disappointed. Then on all sides, the Sikhs were surrounded and trapped. On one side, the Hill-Rajas had blocked their way, on the rear side the locust- like army of Lakhu was pursuing them. On the third side was the roaring river around them. At that time, the Khalsa could not think of anything. What could be done when they were in such a tight corner? Mustering forces for a formidable attack, the Sikhs broke through the line of the fortification of hill-men; some Sikhs even dared to ascend the hill-tops but the hills were so steep that many fell down and perished, but even so some proceeded with courage on foot and holding on to the plants climbed the ridge.

Another group of Sikhs aggressively moved forward and reaching the riverbank flung their horses into the river but unfortunately at that time the river was swollen and the force of the current carried the horses and riders to a watery grave. During this calamity when a brave warrior like Sardar Gurdial Singh was drowned, no one else dared to cross the torrential river. For the whole day, the Sikhs fought both with the Hill-Rajas and Lakhpat's forces. The enemy's artillery did a lot of damage, to the Sikh guerrillas who had lost practically all their ammunition and it was their religious fervour alone which enabled them to use their daggers without losing their spirits. Whenever the Sikhs lost ground and the enemy appeared like winning, the Jathedar (Chief) addressed the Sikhs thus:

"Let all the Khalsa retreat and pack up everything;
For once fully determined, let us make a final charge;
Let us muster courage and attack Lakhpat's forces;
Those who escape will become rulers;
Those who die will go to Guru's abode." (Panth Prakash)

In pursuance of this order, the Khalsa gathered in a compact body and made such a terrible charge that the Turkish forces got panic-stricken; just as the peacock goes through the creepers of a gourd field, tearing the leaves apart in the same way, the Khalsa pushed its way:

"Just like roaring lions, ten to twenty Sikhs made a charge;
May be all the Sikhs would become martyrs, but the
Turks tried to save their lives
The Sikhs attacked with their swords the forces of Lakhu,
The Guru protected the Sikhs just as the teeth protect the tongue."

As a result, a great tumult arose. Just as the moon is surrounded by the stars, in the same way the Sikhs were encircled by the enemy's ranks and with great courage they pushed forward. A bullet pierced the thigh of Sardar Jassa Singh, but he did not lose heart. Covering his thigh with an improvised bandage, he continued fighting, as if he had not been wounded. On one side Faizla Khan- the leader of 12,000 troops-was slaughtering the Sikhs; when Sardar Kapur Singh saw this, he aimed an arrow at him. Watching this situation, one Turk attacked the Sardar with his sword, but Sundri had anticipated the intention of the Turk; she spurred her horse, and attacked the Turk with her sword and her horse trampled over him. On the other hand, the arrow of Sardar Kapur Singh hit the target and pierced through Faizla Khan's body. In this way, till sunset the Sikhs continued a fierce battle against the Turks for the liberation of their mother land.

"It was a great holocaust, a ruthless disaster where thousands died fighting. The Sikhs fought the combined forces of the Turks and the Hill-Rajahs. The two allied enemies were caught in the middle and they resisted. They fought on a battle-field which covered almost six miles till the darkness prevailed."

When night fell, the troops of the enemy retired for rest. The Sikhs camped on the opposite side. The other groups of Sikhs walked and assembled in the jungle where Sardar Sukha Singh had gone. It was a sad time for the Sikhs. Alas! Having fought the battle in which thousands were slain and countless wounded, the hungry and fatigued Sikhs had their painful wounds and grievous injuries, and many calamities still looming over their heads; the sacrifices of the Amritdhari Sikhs were really remarkable. There was no cry or lament; the Sikhs were seen reciting their prayers and uttering ; *Waheguru!* At this time Sundri, Dharam Kaur, Mai Sada, Beera, Dhamo and other ladies got busy tying bandages after putting wadding soaked in oil and ointment over the wounds. Every Sikh became busy in assisting and comforting another. The Sikhs sighted a village nearby. The Khalsa sent a contingent to the village and managed to get some eatables to satisfy their hunger and then got ready for rest. Sardar Sham Singh and Jassa Singh who were still on their horsebacks addressed the Khalsa thus: "Our wounds will get worse, the effect of hunger will further debilitate us, and in the morning, the enemy will attack and finish us off. Let us therefore get ready and flee as fast as we can."

Acting on this decision, the Khalsa marched away at mid-night. The Turkish troops on getting this information followed them but those who entered the jungle were killed by the Sikhs, and those Sikhs who came out of the jungle were likewise slaughtered by the Turks. Then the Khalsa decided that they should march on the low-lying plain and fighting a rear-guard battle keep up the retreat in the jungle. In this way, the Khalsa Dal under the protection offered by the brushwood proceeded further and by sunrise entered a dense jungle where they took rest.

Lakhpat pursuing the Sikhs reached this place. First he encamped outside the jungle and then made a plan. He collected forced labour and bribed the local people. He gave them rifles and spears and forced them into the jungle so that they may beat, loot and kill the Sikhs. These people entered the jungle and began to harass the Sikhs. At this time, Sardar Sukha Singh addressed the Sikh troops thus: "Brothers! These are ordinary mercenaries and not trained soldiers. If we do not resist we shall be killed. As they have come here fully armed, let us fight with them. "When the Sikhs made an ordinary sortie, they all fled and thus this nuisance came to an end. The Khalsa got a number of weapons and horses from them.

Proceeding further, the Sikhs entered the territory of Rama. He was an enemy of the Khalsa; it was thought wise to cross the river immediately and to avoid Rama and his men, The Khalsa made buoys of grass and thus crossed the river. They stayed on the other bank for sometime, so that those in the rear might also join them. They could not help some who were drowned in the river.

Now the Khalsa was on an open ground along the river and the sands on the bank were getting hot. The miserable Khalsa now faced an arid desert. The scorching wind parched their bodies. The layers of hot sand singed their feet. Not a trace of greenery or a bush could be seen. The Sikh riders were moving ahead, but those on foot or those who had lost their shoes had a very hard time and feared death. Many tore their clothes and bandaged their feet; they rode horses by turns and thus shared their sorrows. The woe-stricken Khalsa struggled through the blazing wilderness into fresh hidings so that they could recover to fight again and relieve the oppression of the brethren who had been ungrateful citizens of their motherland. According to Panth Prakash: "They tore their clothes from the bodies; they tied them round their feet; even so their feet suffered burns; the Sikhs at times shouted out of pain, but moved on without a halt; hunger and thirst made them helpless; they suffered the scorching heat; thus facing their affliction, the platoons of Sikhs passed over the sand dunes."

Suffering these hardships, the Sikhs now reached Manjha (Central Doaba) region. But here they could not rest, for they feared that Lakhpat would chase them. So the Sikhs hurried on; they crossed the Beas river and hastily ferried the Sutlej river. Now they entered the Milwa region Lakhpat was disappointed, for he lost their trace and returned to Lahore. He brought with himself to Lahore many fatigued, disabled and wounded Sikhs whom he had captured in Parol and Kathua. He got all these Sikhs murdered at Delhi Gate. Lakhpat brought with himself also many bullock cans full of heads of martyred Sikhs, with which he filled up the wells and erected some towers. The place where the Sikh groups were massacred was then a horse market. Now it is called Landa Bazar and also Shahid Ganj. Bhangu wrote in this connection thus:

"All those Sikhs who had gone with the Nawab,
Had their heads cut and built into towers."

Reaching the Malwa region, the Malwa groups of the Khalsa dispersed to their villages. The Sikhs of Malwa welcomed their grief-stricken brethren. The wounded were treated and the weak were nourished. In this way the Sikhs whom Lakhpat had ruined and debilitated were tended and cared by the Sikhs of Malwa and again they became fit and strong. The battalion of Sardar Sham Singh reached the region of Maharaja Phul, that of Sardar Kapur Singh at Vjihokay, of Sardar Jassa Singh at Jaito. They got their soldiers treated and they recovered in about five months. The Sikhs who had gone to the hills came back in disguise and joined their groups. Within a short period, the Sikhs were restored to health and vigour. This incident relates to the month of Jeth 1803 Bikrami (1746 A.D.) and this battle is known as *Chotta Ghallughara* (Small Holocaust).

Many historians are of the opinion that about eight thousand Sikhs were killed in this battle. Some extend the number to be ten or twelve thousand, but according to Rattan Singh the number could be forty to fifty thousand; in fact the correct number could not be known. The hard fact is that the Sikhs have not raised any monument in their memory. The other communities of the world who had even traditionally admitted, the sacrifices of their ancestors have built memorials but the Sikhs have not only neglected the tremendous sacrifices of their fore-fathers, but also forgotten to record faithfully their history.

After this battle, the Lahore region continued to suffer like a grief-stricken bride between the rulers of Kabul and Delhi. The fact was that the ruler of Lahore then was Nawab Zakariya Khan whose popular name was Khan Bahadur, but the Sikhs called him Khanu. He became the ruler of Lahore in 1783 Bikrami (1726 AD) and died in Jeth 1802 Bikrami (1745 AD). After him, his first son Yahiya Khan became the ruler of Lahore and his second son-Shah Nawaz Khan-became the ruler of Multan. The small holocaust narrated above, ended in the regime of Yahiya Khan in Jeth 1803 Bikrami. It so happened that Shah Nawaz Khan attacked Lahore and conquered it and became its ruler and imprisoned his brother Yahiya Khan. But by some strategem Yahiya Khan escaped from

the prison and reached Delhi. After getting this information Shah Nawaz feared that the forces of the emperor of Delhi would surely punish him and therefore he wrote a letter to Ahmed Shah Durrani, the King of Kabul, to visit Lahore and take over his kingdom. As soon as Durrani learnt this, he proceeded from Kabul to Peshawar. In the meantime, the emperor of Delhi wrote to Shah Nawaz that he had recognised Shah Nawaz as the Nazim (Governor) of Lahore and that he should fight against Durrani. Shah Nawaz was in a dilemma. He was appointed by Delhi Emperor; he fought against Durrani but was defeated and fled to Delhi. Durrani's attack occurred in Poh 1804 Bikrami (1747 AD). The cruel Durrani looted Lahore mercilessly and occupied it. Lakhpat paid the ransom to Durrani, and regained favour. After arranging the administration of Lahore, Durrani proceeded towards Delhi. The forces of Delhi Emperor marched to the Punjab to challenge Durrani. There was a pitched battle near Sarhind at a place called Manupur. Durrani lost the battle and fled to his country.

It is said that Durrani, while leaving, nominated Lakhpat as the Governor of Lahore. However the Delhi Emperor had already entrusted the administration of Lahore province to Muin-ul-Mulk who had routed Durrani. Therefore Diwan Lakhpat was jailed and fined rupees thirty lakhs. About twenty lakhs were recovered from his estate, but for the balance due, he was thrown into confinement. Then Diwan Kaura Mal paid a huge sum for his release and took him in his charge. Kaura Mal's reputation grew on account of his fair-mindedness and his achievement at the Lahore Court.

Let me tell you about the fate and end of Lakhpat. Kaura Mal kept Lakhpat under strict guard, and secretly sent a word to the Khalsa to settle their score with Lakhpat. So the Sikhs gave him due punishment for his misdeeds and atrocities. Killing of the innocents, destroying thousands by torture, shedding the blood of Sikh widows and helpless orphans never go in vain. His captors matched his punishment with his crimes. After six months' confinement by the Khalsa, Lakhpat faced a miserable and agonizing death. Giani Gian Singh, the author of *Panth Prakash* wrote:

"After great torments Lakhpat died; Kaura Mal died later. The latter was a just administrator and won renown in the world."

After the holocaust of Jeth 1803 till Poh 1803, the Khalsa did not heave a sigh of relief. Durrani proceeded to the north after looting the city of Lahore. As he approached the Sutlej River, the Khalsa jumped out of every branch and tree for vengeance; this was the period of the success of the Khalsa. In Malwa, the Singhs rose like veteran lions and their strength increased to twenty thousand. Even though, by torture and war, a large number of Sikhs had been decimated, their strength was made up by the new entrants. The magic of their tremendous sacrifice, their holy living and prayers, their zeal for maintaining the freedom of their country, and the barbarity of the rulers won them many admirers and recruits, and the *Amrit* baptism gave them additional inspiration. When the rulers of Lahore and Delhi were busy fighting, the Khalsa began punishing their enemies. Ahmed Shah Durrani after his defeat fled away, but the Khalsa pursued him up to the Jheluma River and recovered a lot of the country's booty and restored it to their owners.

The Khalsa gathered at Amritsar and held a holy assembly for taking a decision-*Gurmatta*-on the proposal for erection of a fortress at Ramsar where the compilation of Sri Guru Granth Sahib was made. This project for protecting the city of Amritsar against foreign attack was approved. It was originally a mud enclosure to serve as a shelter for the troops which was later turned into a fort and had farms around it and was called *Ram Rauni*. Mir Manu had by this time taken over as the new Governor (suba) of the Punjab and he decided to destroy the Sikhs and committed several atrocities. In consultation with Adina Beg - his army chief-he ordered the arrests of Sikhs and those captured were beheaded in the horse-market at Lahore. After committing such dreadful outrages against the Sikhs, Mir Manu wanted to capture *Ram Rauni* fort, and he assigned this work to Adina Beg. He

gave him Khan Aziz, Sadiq Beg and others for assistance and they proceeded to Amritsar to capture the fortress of the Sikhs.

The Khalsa was in a defiant mood. On hearing of the expedition, the Sikhs of the neighbouring areas sent cartloads of food and fodder to their comrades, but the authorities put obstacles in their way. The Turkish troops laid a siege to *Ram Rauni* which lasted for a long time, but the Turks were no near success. The Sikhs started firing from behind the fortress and destroying the enemy like grams in the fire. On some days, the Khalsa came out suddenly and scared the Turks and after looting the enemy returned inside the fortress.

There was a very brave Sikh named Jassa Singh among the Turkish troops. Once, on suspicion of killing his infant daughter, the Khalsa had ex-communicated him. Since that time, he had taken employment along with his hundred Sikh retainers with Adina Beg of Lahore. The latter, along with Jassa Singh and his associates was engaged in the siege of *Ram Rauni*. The Turks besieged the Sikhs for many months and nearly exhausted their patience. Besides the rations were finished and this caused very great hardship to the Sikhs. They thought of many plans but none proved viable. Ultimately the Khalsa thought that they should come out and die fighting as martyrs. This news reached the Turkish army. Jassa Singh's patriotism and religious fervour were roused as he thought of the proposed martyrdom of the Sikhs and regretted his being a traitor to his community. He reflected on his conduct and said to himself, "The Guru is the Khalsa, and I am an enemy of the Khalsa. It would be right for me to seek forgiveness for this lapse and and salvation through martyrdom."

Repenting over his conduct, he sent a letter tied to an arrow to the Khalsa, expressing his love for them and requesting a suitable reply in the same manner. After getting a satisfactory response, Jassa Singh along with Sikh retainers fled from the Turkish Camp and joined the Khalsa with the intention of seeking forgiveness for his action and intending to die with them, fighting against the Turks.

It has already been mentioned that even before the attack on *Ram Rauni*, Mir Manu had started the genocide of the Sikhs. He had also encircled the Sikhs in *Ram Rauni*. On the other hand, he had sent letters to the Hill-Rajahs to capture the Sikhs who had taken shelter in the hills. Hundreds of Sikhs were, thus, captured daily and brought to the animal market at Lahore for slaughter.

Adina Beg had by some strategem planned to call the Sikhs for peace-parley, but somehow the Sikhs doubted his intentions and kept away. In the meantime, he got reinforcements from Lahore. Manu sent troops under the charge of Diwan Kaura Mal. Now Kaura Mal was in a real tight corner. On the one hand he did not want to crush the power of the Sikhs and on other hand waging war with Sikhs was the compulsion of his official duty. It is said that Sardar Jassa Singh wrote to Diwan Kaura Mal thus: "This is an opportunity to help the Khalsa. You are our friend and please come to our aid." The Diwan, therefore, thought of negotiating peace between the parties. He decided that the Sikhs and Mir Manu's forces should join hands together to repel the attack of the foreign invader-Ahmed Shah Durrani-so that the Pathans may not gain a foothold in the Punjab. So he proceeded to Lahore and succeeded in getting the consent of Manu and thus established peace between the Sikhs and the Lahore ruler. The Sikhs felt happy because they got about six months for rest and recuperation and their recruits also increased. After about a year Durrani led his troops for attack on the Punjab in Maghar 1805 Bikrami (1749 A.D.).

To repel the attack of Ahmed Shah Durrani, Manu marched to Shodhran on the bank of river Chenab. But Manu's troops were no match for Durrani's army and therefore, he bought peace by agreeing to pay the revenue of four districts amounting to about Rs. 14 Lakhs a year. Thus, Durrani without any serious fighting went back to Kabul, while Manu returned to Lahore in a relaxed mood.

After Manu's defeat, the Sikhs of Lahore did create a local disturbance. So, Manu ordered the genocide of the Sikhs again. The reward for killing a Sikh was ten rupees. This horrendous massacre continued for sometime. In the meanwhile Shah Nawaz, who was in Delhi, conspired with the Wazir of the Emperor of Delhi and obtained for himself the Governorship of Multan. With little effort, he occupied Multan. After strengthening his position he started recruitment of soldiers for the invasion of Lahore in order to wrest the region from Manu. Somehow Manu got the news and after considering the situation, decided to attack Multan. He deputed Diwan Kaura Mal for this expedition. The Diwan led the troops and arranged with Jassa Singh Ahluwalia to bring ten thousand Sikh troops with him to participate in the attack on Multan.

It is not possible to give an account of this war but the result was that Diwan's and Sikh forces jointly shared the victory. This war began in Maghar 1806 Bikrami and lasted for seven to eight months. The Diwan occupied Multan on Rakhi day in Sravan 1806.

For this victory Diwan Kaura Mal was rewarded with the title of Maharaja and given sovereignty over Multan and South Punjab region. Maharaja Kaura Mal-the Guru's Sikh-amply rewarded the Sikhs and donated liberally for the renovation of Harmander, Sahib. Earlier Lakhpat in collusion with the then Nawab had got the Amritsar Tank filled up with clay. So Maharaja Kaura Mal had the Tank excavated and cleaned and then got it filled with water. Kaura Mal was a real Sikh and helped the Panth at every stage. The Khalsa rightly called him Mitha Mal. All this happened during 1806-7 Bikrami.

For sometime peace prevailed in the Punjab. The Sikhs were happy and comfortable. There was peace in Lahore, Multan and Doaba. But there was no peace of mind for the Nawab who wanted to possess Sundri. He thought of many plans to kidnap her but to no avail. Sometimes, he would be on friendly terms with the Sikhs, and sometimes hostile to them. Even when he cultivated friendship with them he sent many spies after Sundri, who was spotless in virtue like the Sun, now beyond their reach.

After a year or so, Mir Manu did not pay the agreed amount of tribute to the ruler of Kabul and so Durrani came with his army to the Punjab for the third time in 1807 Samvat. Preparations for war were made by Mir Manu by calling the forces of Maharaja Kaura Mal from Multan, of Adina Beg from Jullundur and of other rulers. On the recommendations of Maharaja Kaura Mal, reinforcements were obtained from the Khalsa. It is said that thirty thousand Sikh soldiers were deputed to Lahore. The confrontation continued for four to five months and occasional fighting flared up between the opposing armies. One morning opposing forces got locked in a fierce battle. By noon, the intensity of the fighting increased and it looked it would be a decisive battle. The heroism displayed by Kaura Mal was outstanding; the Khalsa soldiers also distinguished themselves. Sundri was among the Sikh forces, busy in serving the wounded. The Muslim Nawab who was enamoured of Sundri was also fighting along with the forces of Lahore against Durrani. As the Sikhs and the ruler's troops were fighting for the same cause, the Muslim Nawab had many opportunities of watching and hearing about Sundri being busy with several welfare and altruistic tasks. He was amazed at seeing Sundri facing hardships on the battlefield in her welfare work on five or six occasions. He was more astonished when he learnt that she was serving the wounded soldiers-both of the allies and of the enemy- without any discrimination.

In this battle, Kaura Mal made such a terrible charge from one side that the Pathans lost the ground and were about to flee. At that time, Adina Beg-the Nawab of Doaba-deliberately delayed sending reinforcements to the Diwan's aid, because he did not like that the crown of victory to go to Raja Kaura Mal. Adina Beg according to the strategy was in charge of reinforcements. Kaura Mal along with his forces swooped down on the enemy furiously, but unfortunately a bullet pierced his head and his fearless soul departed from his body. It is mentioned in *Twarikh-Khalsa* that with the death

of this brave and honourable leader, not only Manu lost his heart, but also the entire army suffered a set-back and fled away. Other historians also attribute the cause of defeat to Diwan Kaura Mal's death on the battle-field. Manu rushed to Lahore. The Sikhs seeing, their friend (Kaura Mal) killed and Manu fleeing, became dejected. In fact it was the wisdom of Kaura Mal which had protected a tyrant like Manu from the clutches of the Sikhs on many occasions- just like a tongue which is secure in the midst of teeth-and prevented his downfall.

History tells us that after Kaura Mal's death, Mir Manu committed such atrocities against the Sikhs, that one shudders to think of them, and perhaps these could be mentioned at some later stage. The situation might be summed up with this thought in mind: 'when the plaintiff fled away, what could the witnesses do.' With their minds full of apprehensions, the Sikhs also dispersed and left the battlefield.

At this time Sundri and Dharam Kaur were bandaging the thigh of Bijla Singh which had been injured by a bullet. Even so Bijla Singh with determination rode on his horse and left. The Sikh ladies also mounted their horses and followed their brothers. The horse of Sundri was moving slowly on account of some injury; he was able to carry the fair rider. However, Sundri could not keep pace and was left behind. While in flight Sundri spotted the body of a wounded Pathan covered with blood, lying in a ditch. He was hovering between life and death and was writhing in pain and utterly exhausted like one fatally wounded and crying, "Water! For God's sake!" Sundri like a compassionate Sikh took pity on his serious condition. She could not but attend to the needs of a person in such a sad plight. Realising her own helplessness and sacrificing her personal safety, she dismounted and took out her aluminium vessel and poured two handfuls into the victim's mouth. For the wounded man, this was not ordinary water. It was the much-needed life-giving water-*Amrit*. The Pathan gained consciousness. He opened his eyes and said in Persian: "A thousand thanks to you!" Sundri saw that he had sword-injuries on his knee and thighs and one more on his chest. She tore off his turban and removed the blood and dressed the wounds. When the Pathan saw this, he felt extremely grateful. Joyfully he asked, her, "Are you a Muslim, a person of faith? Tell me who are you-a Muslim! How can anyone else do such a good deed? It is not possible for non-Muslims-the Kafirs-to do any goodness. Who are you? Are you a Muslim or a Kafir? How can Kafirs be benevolent? Surely, you must be a Muslim?" Sundri did not understand his; Persian, but only sensed that he wanted to know who she, was. Naturally she shook her head to indicate; that she was not a Muslim, and uttered "Singhni (Sikh lady)". In fact Sundri's mind was tense because she was away from her companions. As soon as: Sundri uttered the word "Singhni", the Pathan got furious; He took up his sword from the ground and thrust it with great force against the helpless Sundri- the goddess of compassion. He then fell down and expired.

Sundri-the gem of the Khalsa-fell down after receiving the terrible blow from the Pathan. A fountain of blood gushed from her body; she became unconscious; her breathing became slow; her face grew pale and she appeared like an idol made of marble. Alas, Sundri! Your compassion became your killer. You had been warned by Sham Singh earlier: "O sister! Do not trust your foes; they are friends of nobody. The enemy and the snake are alike. There is no remedy against their sting. But innocent Sundri; you are naive; you do not know diplomacy. You are indeed an embodiment of charity and pity." Look, how you are lying low alone! There is no help. Ah, your loving horse looks at you again and again; he comes to sniff you and then he looks around as if he is expecting a Sikh to turn up and help. Sometimes he stares at the Pathan. But what can he do? He is a tongueless animal! O Sundri; blessed are you and your faith which have inspired love even among animals. Lie down, dear Sundri, in this deserted place for centuries. Alas! Who can tell about the ways of Providence?

"O Sikh maidens of today, born with a silver spoon in your mouth and living in luxury and comfort! The daughters, sisters and mothers of the poor and rich Sikhs! Look at the faith and the plight of

your forerunner Sundri. She never loses her faith. She takes a risk with her life, but does not give up her virtue. In times of trouble and calamity, she remains firm and sticks to the doctrines of Sikh religion. Just look at yourselves and find out for yourself if you are damaging the Sikh community or not!

Abandoning your God and Satguru, you worship stones, idols, trees, monasteries and spiritual guides. Being indifferent to Sikh religion, you stray into other religions. Being unresponsive to your Gurus, you are imparting knowledge of alien religions to your own children. Your children when they grow up will be half-Sikhs. They will be outwardly Sikhs but argumentative like Brahmins and even dressed as Muslims. The trunk and foliage will be of the Malberry-tree standing on a supporting leg of a Neem-tree. You have abandoned the *Amrit* and regarded the left-overs of robed Sadhus as part of Sikh religion. You have kept your sons away from *Amrit* and made them wear the sacred thread and *dhoti*; You have followed the customs of others for your marriage and funeral. You have patronised *Siyapa* (prolonged mourning after death) and thereby made your body unhealthy and your mind weak. By sitting on rags and wearing dirty clothes to mourn, you have caused your husbands much trouble and nuisance; you rode on young animals along with your sons and husbands and loitered far and wide and wasted time and money; you have looted your own house and given the contents to greedy exploiters of religion. You have given up the recitation of Sri Guru Granth Sahib and disgraced your intellect by wearing threads said to be sanctified by *mantras* (talismans). You have become the butt of ridicule by replacing clean and thick garments with thin and flashy dresses. Neglecting the living God, you have nurtured snakes with fried cakes. The true and unique Immortal God has been abandoned and you have taken the road to hell and persuaded your husbands and sons to follow the same foolish path.

Just reflect for a moment on the calamities faced by Sundri and the miseries and sufferings undergone by Sikh ladies for the protection of your Dharma. Remove the confusion from your mind and become pure Sikh women. For the sake of wealth, do not give your daughters in marriage to non-Sikhs. The non-Sikhs-both male and female-ridicule your prolonged mourning, but you are so thick-headed that you do not mind their insults and you are losing your Sikh character. Do a little good to yourself and to your children. Be brave and truthful Sikh ladies like Sundri; be virtuous like her and make yourself and children true Sikhs, otherwise you will prove to be, for your husband, the pernicious creeper which dries up the plant and then itself perishes.

Dear reader, Sundri got into other troubles; let us find out more about her.

When the army of Mir Manu fled, the Nawab also escaped, so that he might not get into any trouble. He, according to his own scheme was proceeding to a place of safety when he happened to pass a ditch in which Sundri was lying. Seeing a rider-less horse, he guessed that probably a man of his own army might be lying wounded here. He spurred his horse towards the ditch and what did he find? He found his beloved Sundri covered with mud. Feeling nervous, he dismounted his horse and saw that the victim was still breathing. He felt a bit hopeful and with the help of his two horse-men, he washed the wound which ran from shoulder to chest and placing some cotton pads on her chest, he bandaged the wound. Now he began to think of getting-a palanquin for her, but it was nowhere to be found. Under compulsion, a Rajput put Sundri on his own horse. From a distant village, he got a palanquin and called a Brahmin physician for her treatment. The physician did not open the wound but gave some medicine and tonic. The Brahmin was treated like a bonded labourer and asked to do free service and he dared not disobey.

The Nawab according to his plan went to Lahore, as he had to do some important tasks, but he sent Sundri to his town. Sundri was lodged in a beautiful room in his palace, many good physicians were collected for her treatment; she had numerous Hindu slave-girls to serve her. Sundri was unconscious, but whenever she opened her eyes and looked around, she did not utter a single word.

The physician examined the wounds and cleaned them with care; then he stitched them with silk-thread and bandaged them. She was given medicines for gaining vigour.

Slowly and steadily, Sundri's condition improved. After a month, she could only ask: "Where am I? Where is my brother? Where is Dharam Kaur?" The reply given to her queries was as follows: "This is a city conquered by the Sikhs. You are now living in the palace of the ruler, and your brother and others have gone for some work to Lahore." Sundri kept quiet. The Muslim ruler returned after some days, but he visited her at the time when she was asleep, because he realised that if Sundri somehow came to know that she was confined in the Nawab's palace, she would worry herself to death.

After many months, Sundri regained her health. Her wounds were healed; she felt invigorated; her face looked cheerful, but sometimes she suffered from fever. Slowly Sundri began to know about her situation and the ruler would also visit her every: third or fourth day and tell her about his love and then she would feel sick again. After a few days when she would improve in health, the tyrant - ruler paid a visit with the result that her health suffered a setback. The physicians told the ruler not to visit her, but he did not listen to them. On the contrary, he blamed them that their medical treatment was not up to the mark.

Let me now return to the story of the Khalsa Dal. They fled to Lahore and proceeded to Amritsar for rest. Here also they found no trace of Sundri. They searched a lot, but did not get any clue. Some Sikhs went to the battlefield in disguise to search for her dead body, but they found no trace of her. On the other hand, there was another calamity facing the Khalsa. Mir Manu made peace with Durrani and sent him back to Kabul. Now he began to rule the country on his own. Maharaja Kaura Mal was dead and there was no sympathiser of the Sikhs at the Lahore Court; therefore everything went against them. Again the genocide of the Sikhs began. Mobile troops marched through the Punjab hunting the Sikhs, At several places, police-stations were established and mud fortresses erected to capture and torture the Sikhs. The village representatives were forced to furnish sureties to guarantee that they would never allow any Sikh to stay in their neighbourhood. The result was that civilian Sikhs like agriculturists, traders and labourers were captured and killed. They were beheaded in the horse-market in Lahore.

For the Sikhs, it was a doomsday. They were once again forced to live in the jungles and forests. After the male Sikhs had sought shelter in jungles, the spies got the families of these Sikhs arrested. Mir Manu was a cynical tyrant. Volumes could be written about his atrocities, but his treatment of the Sikh ladies was brutal, to say the least. Many Sikh ladies who were captured and brought to Lahore refused conversion to Islam, in spite of Manu's great efforts. Then began a series of tortures. First, they were starved; then they were forced to grind one and a quarter maund (about 45 Kilos) of corn everyday and given other punishments. Their children were captured and speared to death in front of them; then they were forced to grind corn with the dead bodies of their children in their laps, but these dear Sikh ladies of Guru Gobind Singh did not give up their faith. In this way, Mir Manu wrought havoc, without any fear of God.

So during this troublesome period, it was very difficult for the Sikhs to find Sundri. Nevertheless the affection of Dharam Kaur, the devotion of the Sikhs, who at one time had got comfort at the hands of Sundri, and the lovers of the Panth left no stone unturned to seek her. Spies like Bijla Singh and Binod Singh were sent out and they visited many places but only brought the news that Sundri was ill and under medical treatment in the custody of the Nawab. However, they could not make any arrangement for her release from captivity.

"In the company of friends, be ready to share whatever you have".

Though Sundri's wounds had healed, she could not regain her health because slow fever persisted for a long time. In addition, the pang of separation from her brethren, the fear of loss of chastity, the rigour and severity of imprisonment with the enemy created in her a severe mental tension and she did not improve in her physical health. She would recall again and again the following lines from *Gurbani*:

"Firstly, I feel the pain of separation; another pain is of hunger; another pain is the fear of the powerful demons of death; another pain is that infested with disease, my body will perish. O ignorant physician, minister no medicine to me!" (AG, p.1256).

One day the physician told the ruler that if a cheerful and happy-go-lucky maid-servant is made available to Sundri, her fever may vanish and she may recover quickly. The maid-servants belonging to the hills were like dumb creatures. They selected two of them, but Sundri did not like them. They found a Punjabi maidservant who was both beautiful and prudent. Her name was Radha. Sundri approved of her because she knew a lot of *Gurbani* (Guru's hymns) by heart. Sundri never forgot to repeat silently the Holy Name. She remembered God every moment. Whenever the new maid recited *Gurbani*, Sundri would feel very happy. From dawn to late in the day the recitation of *Gurbani* continued but fever persisted to the detriment of her health. Some physicians diagnosed that it was tubercular fever; some thought that it was seasonal fever which was then prevalent in some cities. But unfortunately no medicine proved effective to cure Sundri.

One day the ruler asked Radha in private as follows; "Tell me what is Sundri missing so that I can provide it for her. I know she is a Sikh lady and is not prepared to renounce her religion at any cost. If by my adoption of Sikhism inwardly she will regain her health; I am ready to do so". The maidservant replied: "I shall find out the answer in due course from Sundri, but still I feel that her malady is mental. Excuse me, can I make a request?" "Tell me", the Nawab answered, "be not afraid."

Radha: "You are getting Sundri treated by well-known physicians, but they have not been successful so far. You do not consult traditional *Vaidyas* who also have some good remedies. I have seen worse cases than Sundri's being cured by a physician who is called Bawariya Walla. He lives in a garden near Nathu-di-Tibbi. All the people suffering from fever go to him and he cures them by just one dose of medicine. You must try his treatment for Sundri."

Nawab; "I do not mind doing so."

The Nawab made enquiries in due course and he came to know that there was a Bawariya Walla physician who offered a guaranteed care for any fever. The next day he called this physician. The latter felt the pulse of Sundri and said: "She is suffering from the fever of tension, which is a psychological condition." Then he examined the nerves of the foot, then her sputum and then he remarked. "It is nerve fever. I can cure her but the environment of the city is filthy. If you take her to an open and spacious place on the water-front, I am sure she will recover her health".

Nawab: "I can send her to any place you desire".

Physician: "The sea-coast will be an ideal environment; the next best place is the bank of a lake and if that is not possible, at least a visit to the bank of the river Beas can be arranged." Then the physician burnt real pearls worth about one hundred rupees along with a desert herb and made a sandal-wood paste and pounded some kernels and mixed some of his own medicines and then made three doses. With that medicine, the fever of Sundri lessened. The physician won completely the confidence of the ruler. The very next day, tents, tarpaulins and other, paraphernalia, a number of riders, the ruler himself, Sundri and her maid-servant reached the bank of river Beas. On account of

better and healthier environment of open countryside, Sundri recovered her health in three days. The physician then advised that if she were removed to some place on a lake, she would feel much better. After some thought, it was decided to remove her to the lake near Kahnuwan. On the third day, the camp was shifted there. Here Sundri felt that she had regained her normal health.

One day seeing Sundri in a happy mood, the ruler came and sat beside her and began to talk of various things. Sundri heard him patiently like an astute judge listening to a plaintiff. Then she said: "Nawab Sahib! I am not an ungrateful person like many other people. You may get me treated in prison and I shall accept your goodness with thanks, but your intention to marry me is impractical, because, look and listen, I am like your own daughters. You are the ruler, you should show compassion to your subjects". But the Nawab made a lot of entreaties and they were not free from hints of threats. Then Sundri replied: "Now that you have been so kind to me, be a little more accommodating. Wait for three days and then I shall give you a definite reply. I want some time for serious thinking". The ruler did not want to displease Sundri and so he agreed to it.

The next day at noon when the ruler was playing chess, his servant suddenly came and said to him: "Sir, there is a cloud of dust rising from yonder direction. Perhaps this indicates the movement of an approaching army." The ruler answered: "It may be a dust-storm". Again after some minutes the servant came back and remarked "Sir, I can see distinctly now the horsemen in the distance". Immediately the Nawab got up to check things for himself. He recognised they were Sikh riders. His soldiers got ready to face the approaching Sikhs. The ruler got nervous and before he could get ready to meet them, almost one hundred Sikh riders reached the spot. Almost thirty of them surrounded the mound on which the tent of Sundri was pitched the remaining riders combated with the soldiers. Balwant Singh challenged and shouted to them: "You are two hundred Turks and we are just one hundred Sikhs. Let us fight to the finish". The Turks acted as if they were very keen on defending themselves and saving their skins. Sundri was disturbed by the tumult outside and rushed out of her tent. When she saw the Sikh riders, her brethren, her joy knew no bounds. This was just the time for quick action and agility for every one. Radha-the maid of Sundri who was in fact Dharam Kaur-brought a horse near Sundri and the Bawariya-walla physician-who in reality was Bijla Singh- put a saddle on the horse. Sundri immediately mounted the horse. Another horse was snatched from a Turk; it came handy for Dharam Kaur. So they tried to escape from the arena of the battle, leaving the remaining Sikhs busy in the fight with the Turkish soldiers.

The ruler was well acquainted with the tactics of the Sikhs for he had faced them many a time; he understood the object of the Sikhs, which was the rescue of Sundri. The ruler with about fifty riders ready by his side stood in a corner of the field. As soon as he observed some movement in the tent of Sundri, he advanced towards it. There was fierce fighting at that spot and twenty Turks and two Sikhs lost their lives in the encounter. The ruler continued attacking the Sikhs with fury, but could not make advance against the impregnable line of the Sikhs. Balwant Singh thought that the expedition might fail. Promptly he shouted to the Khalsa to withdraw from the situation, and turning like lightning, he and his comrades rallied to the protection of Sundri. Now the ruler found it difficult to save his own life, but unfortunately for the Sikhs at this moment the remaining Turks came to the rescue of the Nawab. Now the Sikhs got involved in a confused struggle. Balwant Singh feared that though they may not lose the battle, they may not be able to save Sundri. So in this situation he ordered the Khalsa to keep grappling with the enemy. He changed the strategy such a way that the Sikhs, fighting and killing were still moving like matchsticks in the centre of a whirlpool; they collected together in a circle. Now one line advanced and fought, while the rear column retraced their steps. Then Balwant Singh shouted: "Disperse". The Sikhs let their horses fly like the wind. Bijla Singh and Sundri passed near the ruler; the latter gave them a fight with his expert swordsmanship.

Bijla Singh and his horse escaped but the sword of the ruler scraped the stomach of Sundri and struck her thigh. Though wounded by this blow, Sundri spurred her horse and reached her companions. She was overwhelmed by pain, but putting her hand against the wound on her stomach, she courageously rode forward. Balwant Singh observed the stream of blood showing on Sundri's clothes and leaving his own horse he jumped on his sister's horse to give her support. He held her firmly and spurred the horse to keep pace with others and entered the jungle. The riderless horse quietly followed them. The ruler was extremely disappointed but decided to return with his retinue to his headquarters. Sadly regretting the result of this skirmish, the ruler brought his wounded sepoys to the city.

In the jungle, the remaining Sikhs were anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Khalsa rescue-party. When it reached, the Khalsa group was much overjoyed. But seeing the seriously wounded Sundri, they were much alarmed. Sardar Sham Singh selected a quiet and shady spot and placed Sundri on a bed. He put cotton pads soaked in oil on her wounds and bandaged them. The thigh wound was under control but the stomach-gash- though the intestines were not cut-bled profusely. Sundri did not lose her senses though she was much enfeebled by the pain and loss of blood.

Immediately some Sikhs went to the village and forcibly brought a wise physician. This man stitched the wound and dressed it. Though Sundri was in great physical pain, she felt happy because she was no longer a captive. At night she had high fever. During the next day she felt slightly better, but she was very weak. For lack of an expert surgeon, her wounds could not be properly treated and they got septic. Observing her own feebleness and lack of vigour, Sundri felt her end was near. Her friends were much alarmed by her debility. In this desperate situation, the wise Bijla Singh, so arranged that the physician who had earlier stitched the wounds of Sundri in the Nawab's palace was forcibly brought for her treatment. Being a captive and afraid of his own life, the physician did what he could to give a very careful dressing to Sundri's wounds. She kept up a cheerful appearance in spite of severe pain. She never moaned or cried. Though she had high fever she was neither restless, nor impatient. In her face one could see her devotion to the Guru and for this reason, she felt convinced that she belonged to the Guru and that the Guru was all the time with her and never away. Life and death are two phases; they are not two different things or objects. In both states, when there is devoted love, there is no sorrow. She realised that if the body survived and continued to remember the Holy Name, it was a temple of God; when the body had to be discarded, it was no more than a skincover for what departed from it. Sundri was not worried by what happened to her body-whether she survived or died-for she believed:

"I fear not the loss of my youth,

If my love of God departs not; Myraids of youths, O Farid, Have withered and decayed without the Lord's love." The debility and feebleness of Sundri increased day by day and as such her well wishers were overwhelmed by despair. One day Balwant Singh asked her as under:

"Dear sister, have you any desire which is not yet fulfilled"

Sundri: "God bless you, my brother! I have no desire; neither my mind indulged in worldly relishes nor cravings. When I kept away from desires, where was the question of worldly enjoyment. What should I crave for? The Guru saved me from any unnatural attachment to domestic life; my mind is beyond the lure of wealth and luxury. I have no attachment except for the Guru and that source of bliss is within me. I am so much absorbed in the love of the lotus-feet of the Guru that I cannot give it up. So my dear brother, when your goal lies within you, where can the mind wander or what desire can disturb it! I enjoy recalling that bliss:

"The mind rides the imaginary horse of-the air; we roam in the sky;
In the sky is a strange garden, where we eat the fruits of immorality, luscious with
nectar.

To speak sweetly and to recite the *Name* is the source of cool breeze;
The reins of the restless mind are in our control; then who needs a rider!" (Sarab Loh)

O dear brother, there is one thought in my mind. I wish I could sit in the physical presence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib here and listen attentively to the recitation of the *Path* and offer my obeisance to the Guru with my feeble body, but this appears to be very difficult. That is why I have given up the idea."

Balwant Singh: "O sister, do not worry. This is not a difficult task. I shall arrange it soon."

Sundri (shedding tears and in a voice choked with emotion): "I am a worthless and insignificant person. When I am gone, you and other Sikhs will have to face great calamities. I had hoped to give comfort to my brethren, but I have been the cause of so many sufferings and troubles which you had to undergo How shall I face Guru Gobind Singh that after taking *Amrit*, I have been able to do very little service to the *Panth*? When the plume-crested handsome Guru will question me: 'O my daughter, what good have you done' at that time what answer shall my embarrassed mind give? I shall feel diffident and small in sitting in the lap of Mata Sahib Devan and she will call me her incompetent daughter".

On hearing these deeply emotional but humble words of Sundri, the eyes of all were filled with tears of sheer gratitude. Sardar Sham Singh patted her with affection and said to her: "O my daughter, you are not a woman, you are a goddess. The *Panth* is proud of pious and excellent ladies like you. The way you have justified your *Amrit* is an example which everybody should follow. You are coming to your father (Guru Gobind Singh) with great glory. Mata Sahib Devan will welcome you with open arms, you are indeed blessed; your very birth is blessed! The *Panth* appreciates your services and all join together in supplication (*Ardas*) for your happiness".

Sundri: "O dear father, I have made mistakes and have done what was not right for me to do". Saying this, she sobbed and lost her consciousness. Some water was sprinkled on her face: soon she regained consciousness. Some Sikhs went away to bring Sri Guru Granth Sahib

Early next morning, Sri Guru Granth Sahib was brought into the camp. Some ten or twelve Sikhs took a bath and then ceremoniously installed the Granth Sahib and started the recitation of *Akhand Path* (uninterrupted reading). Sundri lying on one side listened to the Gurbani; for some time she sat up with support; when tired she would lie down, but her mind was always attentive; her heart was glad; her condition was as cheerful as that of a farm full of rain-drops. Her entire mind and body were imbued with the Holy Name and she felt she was bathing in the ocean of bliss. After forty-eight hours the recitation neared its end. - All the Khalsas assembled in the form of a congregation and sang hymns in chorus; then the concluding part of Guru Granth Sahib was recited; *Anand Sahib* and *Arti* was sung; and then *Karah-Prasad* (consecrated food) was distributed. With great devotion, Sundri ate a little *Karah-Prasad* and thanked God and then addressed the gathering thus:

"My dear brothers and sisters! Though separation is grievous, I am not sad for this reason because the union of souls can never be broken up. At this moment we are all godly persons and the congregation is heaven itself, but I cannot resist saying that I am grateful to the Muslim ruler who spent a lot of money on my illness. You should repay a part of the money to him, so that I may not remain under his debt."

Sham Singh replied; "All right. Do not worry, we shall certainly repay him. Please do not worry about this matter any more".

Sundri: "Dear brothers, the Guru is your Protector; you will have to face many disasters and wage wars, but you will - cross all these hurdles and one day you will be your own masters. I entreat you to regard your women as equal partners and never ill-treat them. If you regard them as inferior to you, you will treat them with harshness and cruelty. If you look at other women with evil intentions, your honour and glory will decline. In the Hindu Shastras (scriptures) the woman is treated as Shudra-an outcaste. All the Gurus have praised and commended women. In Guru Granth Sahib, woman has been eulogized and she has been given equal right of worship and recitation of the Holy Name.

In the same way, the Tenth Guru has given the gift of *Amrit* to women as well, and Mata Sahib Devan has contributed the *Patashas* (sugar pellets) with her own hand to the preparation of *Amrit*. I know that you treat us with sympathy and compassion; you respect us and protect us even by sacrificing your lives. It is for thus reason that we have emerged safely out of the challenges of numerous enemies in this terrible period.

Sundri (looking at Dharam Kaur and other ladies and addressing them): "O sisters, as long as you remain pure Sikh ladies, the entire *Panth* will be strong. If you and your husband have differences, your condition will deteriorate. A woman loves her children and gets so engrossed with them that she will ignore her Guru or *Pir* (spiritual guide). If you turn your face against Guru Gobind Singh and adopt devious ways of worshipping another deity, your children will be cowards like jackals, and evil will become a part of your character. You will lose all respect in the eyes of others and your honour will vanish. Do not get entangled in the spectacle of *Maya* or the illusions of life. They may be good for the body, which is fragile and has a temporary stay here. Just think of the good of your soul which is long-lasting, nay imperishable",

"O my brothers; do not neglect my exhortation. You should uphold the dignity of woman and the high morality of the *Panth* as you have done in your dealings with me. O brothers, when you become kings, do not regard any Sikh inferior to you. Amongst us, wealth is not supreme, character or high morality is supreme. All right, bring some water for me so that I may wash my face and hands".

At that moment, Sundri's face brightened like the full moon and her head appeared to be surrounded by a halo of light. All were amazed at the sight and also at the show of courage overwhelming her physical debility. In the core of their hearts they felt the pang of separation but seemed resigned to God's Will. Dharam Kaur and other ladies-anticipating the death of Sundri-were feeling much anguished within. A wave of resignation swept over the entire congregation.

As soon as water was brought, Sundri washed her face and hands. Reclining on Dharam Kaur for support, she recited the Japji with great devotion and at its conclusion performed the *Ardas*. She asked for forgiveness for her sins and gathering her strength, she folded her hands before Sri Guru Granth Sahib and bowed to it in reverence and recited the following verses:

"O compassionate God! Unite me with Thee; I have fallen at your doorway.
O merciful to the meek! Protect me;
I have wandered with my mind filled with doubts and become tired.
It is Thy prerogative to love the saints and save the sinners;
There is no one else to help me. I make this supplication to Thee, O Lord !Take me
by Thy hand, O Beneficent Lord!
And ferry me across the ocean of this world". (A.G.p. 709)

Sundri prostrated before Sri Guru Granth Sahib; for a long time her head did not move. Feeling apprehensive, Balwant Singh lifted her head and found her dead. Sundri had gone to her Heavenly Father. There was now the empty skeleton of her virtuous body.

At this time, the Khalsa sang Guru's hymns and consigned the body of Sundri-the daughter of Mata Sahib Devan-to the flames. Then they started *Sahaj Path*, which ended on tenth day.

Sundri's loss was felt by the entire *Sikh Panth*. However, Dharam Kaur, could not bear the separation of her dear companion. She fell seriously ill and passed away in grief on the eleventh day after Sundri's death. It was an atmosphere of a strange blend of mourning and resignation for the Sikh group.

Overcome by the loss of his sister, Balwant Singh, wanted to devote himself to meditation in a quiet place, but his friends did not permit him to do so. They insisted that spiritualism and activities of secular life should go hand in hand. There should be inner renunciation of desire and regular time for devotion to the Holy Name. One should live in the world of action and play one's part dispassionately,

From across the border, the news of the attack of Durrani came to the Khalsa. For this reason, Balwant Singh following the Sikh doctrine of "action without desire for fruit" got busy once again in serving the *Panth*.