

Mai Bhago - Noble and Brave Sikh Women

By Sawan Singh

In her childhood, Mai Bhag Kaur was called Bhag Bhari, which means "fortunate". On being baptized, she was named Bhag Kaur. In the Sikh history, she is known as Mai Bhago. She was born in a well known village, Jhabal, near Amritsar. She was the daughter of Malo Shah, son of Bhai Pare Shah. Her grandfather and Pare Shah's brother, Bhai Langaha, had served under Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Hargobind. Bhai Langaha had helped Guru Arjan Dev in the construction of Harmander Sahib and was one of the five Sikhs who accompanied Guru Arjan Dev when he went to Lahore for martyrdom. It shows her two generations were closely involved with the Sikh Gurus.

As a young girl she had heard about the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev, the wars of Guru Hargobind, injustice done to the Sikhs and their harassment by the Mughal army. These left a deep impression on her tender mind. Sad news of the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur and his companions — Bhai Dayala, Bhai Mati Das, and Bhai Sati Das — touched her heart. She made up her mind to stop such injustice and violence against the Sikhs. She had inherited from her family ideals of bravery and courage. Faith, truth, and fearlessness were her ornaments. She had a well built body and looked like a soldier.

She, along with her family, visited Guru Tegh Bahadur twice. She also visited Anandpur with her father in 1699 when Guru Gobind Singh created the Khalsa and was baptized along with other members of her family. She wanted to stay there to learn the martial arts and become a saint soldier, but her father brought her back because she was a woman and women did not take part in the Sikh army in those days. However, she longed to join the Sikh army and started learning the art of warfare and horse riding from her father. She made a top knot of her head hair and covered it with a small turban. She had a spear in one hand, sword in the other, a shield on her shoulders and other small arms in her belt. She had fiery eyes on her bright face. In the beginning she aimed at small bushes outside the village with her small spear. Then she started piercing trees with her spear and learnt horse riding. Soon she became a staunch saint soldier.

She was married to Bhai Nidhan Singh of village Patti near Amritsar. She came to know that some Sikhs of her area had deserted Guru Gobind Singh at Anandpur Sahib and renounced his guruship in writing. The Mughals had betrayed Guru Gobind Singh and the governor of Sirhind was planning a big attack on Guru Gobind Singh at village Dina where he was staying after the Battle of Chamkaur. She could not hold herself, as she was zealous to serve the Guru. Boiling with rage, and moved by love for the Guru, she, the great heroine, said to her husband, "Guard up your lions and let us lay down our lives for the Guru who has sacrificed his father, mother and four sons for the Sikh faith. We must not sit idle when innocent lives are being bricked alive." She was determined to wipe out the badge of infamy from the face of her area.

She, along with her husband, went from village to village and told the people the reality of deserters to them. Ladies of the deserters did not talk to them when they came back, cursed and taunted them. These ladies dressed themselves as soldiers and wanted to proceed with Mai Bhago. She said to the deserters, "Guru Ji has sacrificed his family and comforts for our freedom. We must stand up and protect our rights and faith. We should not hide ourselves like cowards. Everybody has to die. Why not die like a brave person? If you don't join me, I shall take a party of women and die for the Guru." She exhorted the ladies not to entertain the deserters and not to allow them to enter their houses. Her sharp and

frank words pricked the conscience of the deserters and awakened their souls. She challenged their vanity and made them regret. She displayed manly spirit and courage.

They, along with their leader, Mahan Singh, marched to help the Guru and seek his forgiveness. They got armed and they took the oath to die fighting and not to retreat from the battlefield. They meant to make amends for the apostasy.

On their way, they came to know that the Guru was camping at the lake of Khidrana, near Mukatsar. In those days, the whole area was a desert and the full control of the lake was very important for the fighting forces. They were also informed that the Mughal forces, under the command of the governor of Sirhand, were proceeding towards the Guru. Mai Bhago and the party decided to check the army proceeding towards the Guru. They realized that the Mughal army was huge and they were only forty. She thought of a plan and asked the Sikhs to spread their white shirts on the bushes so that they look like tents of the Sikh forces. A shrine called Gurdwara Tambu Sahib, or the Place of Holy Tents, stands on that spot even to this day. They raised slogans of Sat Sri Akal – Bole So Nihal to overawe the enemy.

A bloody battle with the Mughal forces took place and Mai Bhag Kaur fought in the front lines. The mercenary soldiers could not face the devoted Sikhs. The Guru from the mound near the lake supported the Sikhs with showers of arrows. The army generals took to their heels and retreated to save their lives. They even left their wounded and dead soldiers back. It happened in 1705. After the battle, the Guru came down from the mound and found that every member of Bhag Kaur's party was either dead or wounded. He took care of them. Mai Bhag Kaur was lying badly injured. She was treated and soon she recovered fully. Bhai Mahan Singh was dying when Guru Ji reached him. Guru Ji put some water in Bhai Mahan Singh's mouth and said to him, "I am proud of you all. What is your last wish?" Mahan Singh requested the Guru to forgive all the deserters and restore the snapped relationship so that they might die in peace and obtain salvation. The Guru agreed before Mahan Singh could breathe his last. The city of Mukatsar (Pool of Immortalization) was built at that place. 'Mukat' or 'Mukti' means salvation and 'sar' means a pool. These forty Muktas are remembered daily in the Sikh prayers (Ardas). Later on, a Gurdwara was built at the site of the cremation of these martyrs. A great fair is held every year in January in memory of the Guru's arrival there and redemption of the disunited. Pilgrims come from all over the country and attend that function.

The Guru praised the bravery of Mai Bhago. She told the Guru how the forty deserters had fought bravely and laid down their lives. The Guru asked her to go back to her village as her husband and brother had also died in that battle. She expressed her desire to become an active saint-soldier and stay in the service of the Guru. Her wish was granted and she stayed with the Guru as a member of his bodyguards. She accompanied the Guru to Damdama Sahib, Agra, and Nanded, a city in the South of India, and lived there until the Guru left this world. After the Guru's death, she left Nanded for Bidar, an important city nearby. She lived there for some time and preached Sikhism. She died at Bidar. There is a Gurdwara built in her memory near the main Gurdwara Sachkhand at Nanded. Her spear is still preserved at the Gurdwara along with the arms of Guru Gobind Singh. She was a symbol of bravery and courage. Her life story and skill in organization against odds will always be a milestone in Sikh history. Her example inspired many brave Sikh ladies to face death with honor. She is really the Joan of Arc of Sikh history.