

A Turtle's Tale



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I've depicted above an extraordinary event circa 1800 that happened in Patiala, as narrated by an eye witness who was still alive on October 24, 2014 ! On this day some *safai karamcharis* tasked with digging up and trucking out the sludge of the now almost dried up Rajindra Pond found a monster turtle alive and kicking in all that goo:-



From *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, of October 25, 2014

It was found approximately where the elephant in the picture story is. This because as Patiala flourished later, safe under the suzerainty of the Company, after its treaty of 1807 with Ranjit Singh in Ropar, the aquarium outside *sheesh mahal* shown in the picture expanded to a well-maintained clear water lake with house boats and all, and the turtles shown moved out to deeper waters. Where the aquarium is, was put a fountain, then at some time the statue of a white royal who stayed in a house boat on this lake for a while. The pale colour of this statue was well chosen. The pigeon droppings did not stand out. This practical point was overlooked when for some reason, some years after the horrifically violent "cleansing" of Patiala state in late 1947-1948, this colonial reminder was replaced by a statue in black of the apostle of non-violence. The droppings now really stood out.

But returning to the picture story let me go over what all is in it. Seated on that jumbo elephant was someone, still probably a teenager, whom all of Patiala bravehearts called just *sirfira*. For they knew that if Rani Sahib Kaur -- you see her, bouquet in hand, ready to welcome herself the *sirfira* into *sheesh mahal* where arrangements had been made for his overnight stay -- did not manage somehow to placate this teenager into leaving them alone and departing with a *nazrana*, they'll be very soon fighting his superior forces on the battlefield. And it is a good idea to trash talk your opponent a bit before a scrap. Man to man these *malwais*--more precisely *puadhis* -- were just as brave as any *majhail*, and they knew they would put up a good show, but they knew too that, other things being equal, the bigger army prevails. And big certainly was this army from the north. Of fellow Sikhs for sure, but Patiala knew how the tricky *suss* (mother-in-law) of this *sirfira* had enabled him to gobble up one by one other Sikh states up north, and that these unions

had not bode well for the rulers prevailed upon to so unite. Throwing off the last vestiges of the suzerainty of Kabul, this teenager Ranjit Singh had confidently declared his ever growing kingdom to be now under a sovereign Sarkar Khalsa.

On the other hand, the ruler of Patiala was Sahib Singh, most often called weak-kneed. The turtle bristled at this! According to him Sahib Singh was as brave as any in Patiala but much more refined: he was a pacifist who found all spilling of human blood by other humans -- despite glorification and justification like *veer gatti* and *maa bhoomi ki raksha* -- revolting, and preferred to occupy himself with things like music and even mathematics! That *Patiala gharana* was the leading school of classical music in this continent is well-known. Also occidentals in Delhi at that time -- considered by Dalrymple to be then as cultured as Paris or London -- had assimilated themselves a lot. For example their military commander had muslim wives, wore muslim dress, and was fond of ghazals : this Akhtarlooony was indistinguishable from any nawab. In this give and take -- Patiala culture was tied to Delhi's by a frequent to and fro between the litterati of the two places -- even some European mathematics had started seeping into these Eastern towns! The turtle well remembers how Sahib Singh had softly pointed out to a *firangi* that the parallel postulate of Euclid must be given up. Common sense dictates a finite region, not infinite extent. But then, through a point not on a line, we can clearly draw infinitely many lines not meeting it, that is, which are parallel to it! The turtle remembers how that firangi was awed and tongue-tied by this counter made in *shudh* Patialvi puadhi.

But I digress. Obviously the keen geometrical mind of Sahib Singh could see simple and ugly reality. He knew he was not the person to save Patiala from sirfara. So retiring, he had turned over the day by day running of Patiala to his dear older sister Sahib Kaur, who, if anyone at all, had the qualities needed to foil the sirfira's tricky suss and placate this teenager into leaving Patiala well alone after taking a reasonable nazrana.

As the picture shows Sahib Kaur had pulled out all stops! She hired a whole team from a *bajigar pind* in a jungle some miles out from Sanauri gate. From left to right next to aquarium you see a *jadoogar* playing a *been* which somehow is making that spiral of rope unwind straight up and up with his *jamoora* hanging on for dear life at its end. By the by this rope trick still remains a challenge in the West. Then a juggler keeping aloft a huge number of coloured balls in the air and making patterns. Then someone not popular in this pind -- he is immediately asked to "Knock it off!" if he does what he is doing here, there! -- having a merry blast at a new musical instrument he has invented which he described as a cross between a *shehnai* and a didgeridoo. His inclusion in these performers was a joke of sorts on the part of Sahib Singh: he figured this noise might just appeal to the crude ears of the sirfira. Then a couple of comely *bajigarniyaan* tumblers doing a routine which might be called synchronized floor exercises now. Finally and above all that equestrian *bajigar* whose feat holds centre stage in the picture story.

His intended gig was to ride his two mares at a very high speed, one foot on each, and doing some summersaults regaining same position. The three were just about to start, when there was a last minute change! Over-solicitous about the comfort of the strapping sirfira, Sahib Kaur sent a messenger with a *chattri* -- umbrella -- to the *bajigar*, asking him to give it first to the *mahout* of the elephant, before starting his act. So that it could be installed over the head of the teenager potentate, as the sun was getting a wee hot now.

What followed next was absolutely unrehearsed and the turtle -- then a baby standing on his mom who in turn is on his submerged dad -- is convinced that it is the two mares who should get most of the credit. They cooked up between themselves a plan, trusting their rider, with whom they had a close rapport, would instinctively do the right thing. One *ghori*, on which the bajigar was then, ran up fast and then braked suddenly, as if scared of the size of the jumbo. This braking threw the bajigar into that great big parabolic arc. Opening the broly with one hand, and giving *sirfira* at the same time the smartest of salutes with the other, this bajigar dropped the umbrella so that its stick went right into the designated holder. The *sirfira*, so far sitting with a determinedly severe bored expression suddenly broke out into a spontaneous smile. Meanwhile, the second mare had rushed forward speedily to receive the bajigar at the end of the mighty parabola. The turtle tells that that spontaneous smile had soon advanced to much much more. Soon it was with *sirfira* a clear and undiluted case of ROEL = rolling on elephant laughing! Patiala had been saved!!

The bajigar knew he and his mares had performed an equestrian feat unlikely to be repeated ever again. In an adrenaline rush, the first mare caught up with the one atop which the bajigar was now, and the three performed on the streets of Patiala their scheduled routine. *Dhum mach gaayi saaray Patiale vich, ohda naan hi hun Dhum Singh pai gaaya*. Shouting *jaikara* after *jaikara* the bajigar went past Sanauri gate speedily towards his pind, given as a *jagir* to their community by Patiala to keep them from pastimes like highway robberies that they were previously prone to.

It remains to explain that motley group seated on bleachers far away, and a familiar elf riding two paper boats at the same time in the aquarium. He -- *bing* -- was actually not there, but I've taken this bit of artistic license, to acknowledge my great debt to him for this original historical research.

For, you see, I myself don't speak turtle. The interlocutor who interviewed that monster turtle in 2014 and passed on his narration of this event to me was *bing*.

Besides this narration of an event --deemed key by us Sarkarias -- *bing* learnt much more from this wise old turtle, but he found the answers were often given in an indirect Socratic manner.

For example when *bing* gently put in that the versions of this event found in the writings of our family historians were different, this turtle asked: "Tell me where the reporters of the two Patiala newspapers were when this all happened?" Non-plussed (for *bing* didn't even know Patiala had newspapers : neither did I) he did some smart thinking on the spot and came up with the right answer: "Must be near the free food!" The turtle gave him a *shabash* and continued : "Hot *jalebis* and other creations of Patiala *halwais* were available near those distant bleachers." And all the *sirdars* of the town, proper *khunds* and world class trenchermen all, were plying into these goodies with gusto! And these *gappodis* -- you have to talk with a Patialvi to get how good they are at spinning tales! -- were keeping the *sirdars* of the army from the North -- stoic fighters uninterested in childish stuff like *jadu*, but always keen to explore a possible kinship between their family and yours--fully entertained, both with culinary delights, as well as with gossip galore. Sahib Kaur had deemed that if the commonalities between the Sikh fighters of both sides could be underlined, maybe a clash of arms could be avoided.

The turtle opined that some *sirdarnis* were in there too, but he couldn't be certain from that distance. Conversely, from over there, precious little could be seen of that equestrian feat, seen clearly by the baby turtle. Chomping away at jalebis, and hanging on to the bon mots of the bon vivants, the news reporters also didn't see much of what in fact happened.

The turtle thus is suggesting that the family's version of this event is some iteration of what got published then in one or both newspapers. Perhaps this original, I started musing, is amongst some archives of this principality (which amazingly remained free from any and all occupiers from the mid 1700s to a little after 1950!) which Ganda Singh had at one point collated.

But not one of our numerous *naami ittihaskar* = "historians" has deigned to read a single line of what is (but for termite or/and water damage) still there in these Patiala archives. Likewise, the even more conveniently located archives of the Sarkar Khalsa, of which Sita Ram Kohli had once made a good catalogue, now rendered quasi useless. Yet they are very good at spinning out and adding practically every year at least one more to a rapidly growing pile of "history" books.

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