

Administration and Governance of First Sikh Kingdom of Banda Singh Bahadar¹

Atinder Pal Singh

Former Member of Parliament, India.

Abstract

Sikhs established their own Sikh Kingdoms twice – from 1710-1715 and then again from 1799-1849. Historians regard the First Sikh Kingdom of Banda Singh Bahadar from 1710-1715 as a just, benevolent and progressive reign. His kingdom was far ahead of his time. This paper looks at the administration and governance of this First Sikh Kingdom of Banda Singh Bahadar and presents its unique aspects with Western terminology. The Sikh Kingdom had epistocrats, direct democracy, and speedy justice. It brought major fiscal reforms in tax collection.

Keywords: Sikh, Khalsa Raj, Banda Singh Bahadar, Lohgarh, Plato, epistocracy, Sarbat Khalsa, direct democracy.

Introduction

South Asia from Kabul to Delhi had been ruled by Mughals before 1710. They were outsiders. They were descendants from Central Asia with foreign roots, culture, religion, ethnicity, and values. They had no sympathy for the natives whom they ruled over with the sword. Mughal Empire of the era controlled 25% of the world economy. For comparison USA and China together today constitute 25% of the world's economy.

1. Translated and adapted by Avneet Singh, Editor of the journal.

Sikhs led by legendary Sikh General and Administrator Banda Singh Bahadar defeated the Mughal Empire at the epic Battle of Sirhind on May 12th, 1710, and established the First Sikh Kingdom. First Sikh Kingdom was the first time that natives of the land guided by native philosophy established their own kingdom after 700 years of foreign rule and interference. Sikhs had no secret weapon, no outside help, and were outnumbered frequently 10 to 1 in battle.

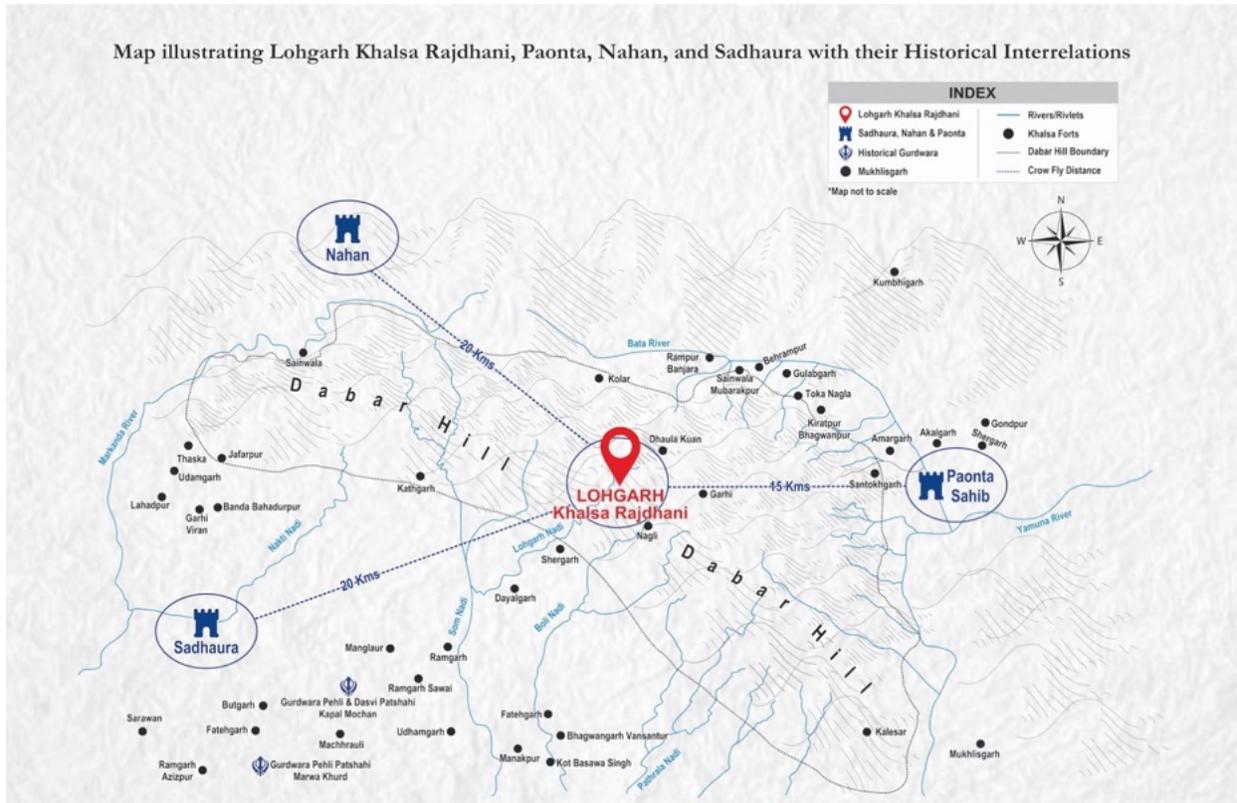
Banda Singh Bahadar's administration and governance model can be summarized as pro-public (ਪ੍ਰਜਾ ਅਧੀਨ), bureaucratic (ਨੋਕਰਸ਼ਾਹੀ), rule of law (ਨਿਆਂ ਅਤੇ ਕਾਨੂੰਨ ਪੱਖੀ), meritocratic (ਗੁਣਤੰਤਰੀ), and *non*-democratic.

Lohgarh: capital of the First Sikh Kingdom

Banda Singh Bahadar established capital of the first Sikh Kingdom at Lohgarh. Construction for a fort had been started by the Sikh Gurus decades ago. The Lohgarh Fort at the capital was spread over 7000 acres and can be considered one of the largest forts in history. It had 52 advanced structures and defense fortifications. It is described as a '*Network of Forts*'.

The Lohgarh fortifications comprised a vast network of forts that worked together to create a formidable defence system (Lohgarh Trust - 52 advance forts, 2025).

The map published by Lohgarh Trust shows scale of the fort, "It sprawls in an almost 50-kilometre radius" (Lohgarh Trust Map, 2025).

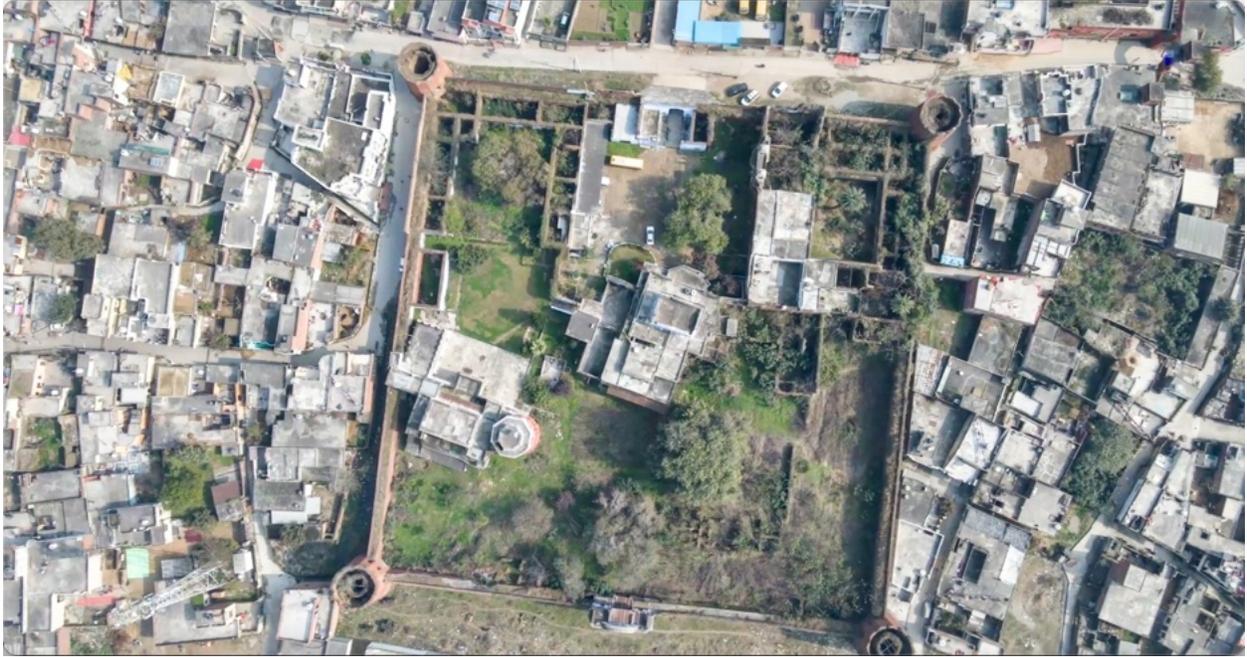


Map of Lohgarh Fort covering 7000 acres (Lohgarh Trust Map, 2025).



Banasar Fort

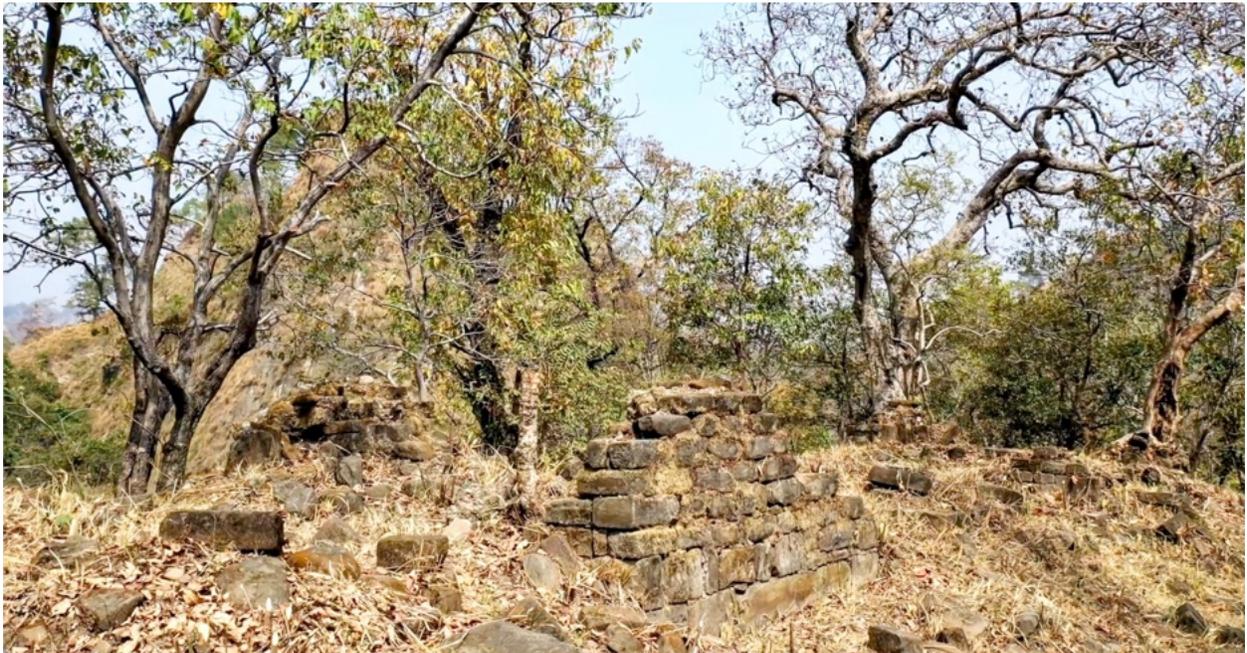
One of the 52 forts and defense fortifications of Lohgarh.
(Picture from author's collection.)



Buria Fort

One of the 52 forts and defense fortifications of Lohgarh.

(Picture from author's collection.)



Ruins of Lohgarh Fort.

(Picture from author's collection.)



Burj (defensive fortification) in Dabar area.
One of the 52 forts and defense fortifications of Lohgarh.
(Picture from author's collection.)



Terrain of Lohgarh Fort.
(Picture from author's collection.)



Gateway of *Khalsa Raj*, Thanesar.
One of the 52 forts and defense fortifications of Lohgarh.
(Picture from author's collection.)



Site of Lohgarh *Chowki* (gateway).
One of the 52 forts and defense fortifications of Lohgarh.
(Picture from author's collection.)



The Author holding a white brick of the 'White Palace'
of Banda Singh Bahadar at Lohgarh.
(Picture from author's collection.)

Abolish feudalism

The First Sikh Kingdom of Banda Singh Bahadar abolished feudalism and gave ownership of the lands to the cultivators of the land.

These Zamindars, or Landlords, who in most cases were high Government officials, were more than autocratic kings in themselves, practically responsible to no higher authority. The authorities in themselves did not interfere in their internal management as long as they paid in their fixed contribution, no matter how, how much or on what basis they realized their exactions from the actual cultivators of land, who were practically reduced to the position of mere slaves. In matters of Government, he introduced one of the greatest fiscal reforms in the country by abolishing the Zamindari System of the Mughals which had reduced the cultivators to the position of slaves (Singh P. G., 1935).

This is considered a landmark in history of the Sikhs as it lay the foundation for inter-generational wealth rather than they being 'mere slaves' (landless

laborers). It also empowered the people to increase their productivity as they were direct beneficiary of the output.

Direct Revenue Collection in kind

Under the older feudal system, the Mughal State delegated feudal lords to collect revenue from the producers (farmers). The feudal lords exploited the people. There was no direct contact of the State with the people. The State did not interfere with the feudal lands as long as it got its revenue. The feudal lords were autocratic and did not care about the people or productivity.

The First Sikh Kingdom of Banda Singh Bahadar abolished feudalism and gave ownership of the lands to the cultivators of the land. The Sikh State then collected revenue directly from the producers without any middleman. The producers had more to themselves, and were empowered to improve their productivity and output. The Sikh State got more revenue from rising prosperity.

Persian sources such as *Ibratnama* quote Sikh Kingdom took 20% of the produce in kind as taxes as compared to 40-50% taxes under Mughal Empire. Another point to note is that taxes were collected in kind as share of the produce. If the farmers and producers had a bad year, they did not have to raise money at a time of failed crops. Later on, the British Empire changed to collecting taxes in cash. Sikh farmers suffered when the crops failed or prices crashed. This drove migration of Sikhs.

The British authorities in the Punjab taxed Sikhs not in kind as the Sikh Kingdom used to, but in cash, so that a sharp fall in crop prices led to the bankruptcy of many peasants who failed to sell their products in the markets at a good price (Yin, 2017).

Epistocracy: governance by experts, rule of the learned

How to provide good governance? This is “one of the oldest, hardest questions of political philosophy” (Thomas Bartscherer, 2023). All civilizations have thought about this and implemented their own solutions.

Decision making power in First Sikh Kingdom of Banda Singh Bahadar lay with the collective leadership of carefully chosen *Khalsa* rather than a monarch. The *Khalsa* were Sikhs who excelled at governance and warfare. The *Khalsa* were initiated into the order by other *Khalsa*.

Khalsa are frequently misinterpreted to mean 'pure'. The word '*Khalsa*' comes from Persian word '*Khalas*' which means 'of the Sovereign'. *Khalsa* answer to their One God who is their Sovereign. Crucially, the decision makers were neither elected by the people, nor hereditary, nor was there a single monarch.

The original 5 *Khalsa* had been initiated by Guru Gobind Singh himself. It is partly because of this reason that the First Sikh Kingdom Banda Singh Bahadar is considered true to ideals of Sikh Gurus. More so than the Second Sikh Kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who reduced the power of *Khalsa*, and ruled partly like a monarch. He was a monarch, even if a benevolent one.

This deviation from governance model prescribed by the Gurus led to more power to the monarch Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his secular modern administration. It also reduced importance of *Khalsa* and Sikh religious institutions. Prof. Ganda Singh and Prof. Teja Singh write in their book 'Maharaja Ranjit Singh' that the Maharaja secularized the decision making in his administration which reduced relevance and influence of Sikh religious institutions. '*Gurmatta*' for Sikhs is the decision from their highest religious institutions that they always obey. The power of '*Gurmatta*' - literally the decision of the Guru - from highest Sikh institutions declined.

After the abolition of political *Gurmatta*, religious *Gurmatta* was allowed to continue, but as the occasions on which it had to be used became rarer and public spirit being dead, it fell into the hands of illiterate fanatics or the irresponsible incumbents of [Sikh] temples, who made it degenerate out of all recognition (Singh P. G., 1935).

Sikh governance model can be compared to Plato's *epistocracy* – governance by experts. The governance of First Sikh Kingdom of Banda Singh Bahadar was based on *epistocracy*. The *Khalsa* were Sikh equivalents of this. It was governance of experts and rule of the learned. It was meritocracy. Sikh rule was

not democratic. *Khalsa* are trained in benevolence, philosophy, political thought, religion, history, and governance. Analogy can be made with Plato's *epistocrats* and Chinese *Mandarin* bureaucrats.

Plato is said to ground his rejection in the thesis that in a well-governed regime, knowledge and political power will coincide. In democracies, by contrast, power will be divorced from knowledge because "general public opinion," which in principle holds sway in a democracy, will be deficient with regard to knowledge (Thomas Bartscherer, 2023).

It is this training in benevolence, philosophy, political thought, religion, history, that Plato recognized as critical for governors. "the ruler of Plato's state should be a possessor of knowledge, a 'fully qualified philosopher'" (Thomas Bartscherer, 2023). The question of how to nurture experts in governance is still relevant today. Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy is part of National University of Singapore. Prof. Kishore Mahbubani was founding Dean of the School. He writes in his book 'Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy: Building a Global Policy School in Asia' that he also contemplated what skills to nurture in a school of public policy.

I asked Joe Nye what the curriculum of a public policy school should consist of. He replied, 'Kishore, it should rest on three pillars: Economics, Politics and Leadership and Management courses' (Mahbubani, 2012).

Direct Democracy

Decisions on matters of local relevance were taken via a form of direct democracy. All Sikhs who were impacted would gather together. They would deliberate on the issues. Decisions were taken via consensus. This is key. It was not a case of simple majority. There were no party lines. There was no elected representative for 4-5 years with unlimited powers and without right to call.

Sarbat Khalsa (ਸਰਬੱਤ ਖਾਲਸਾ) - literally 'All of Khalsa' - is a gathering of all concerned Sikhs. Those who are most affected by the agenda actively participate. All viewpoints are aired. There is no committee. Decisions are made by consensus (general agreement).

A decision by consensus is different from voting and majority. In a decision by consensus, all views are carefully considered and best effort is made to address all legitimate concerns. A decision by consensus is reached when everyone supports the decision and no one strongly opposes it. Process for decisions by consensus are well understood. It may require a facilitator as well. The advantage of this approach is that:

- It does not allow a majority to make decisions against the minority. Decisions are made by consensus. It is not a system based on '51% for, and 49% against' to elect dangerous killer clowns.
- It does not allow truly bad decisions as people would revolt right there on the spot.
- It does not allow decisions to be made by distant nameless faceless authorities or closed door decisions (bureaucratic regulations).
- It does not allow your views to be ignored under the pretext of majority.
- People chosen for a task can be recalled proverbially 'the next day' by calling another *Sarbat Khalsa*.

'Chosen Five' (ਪੰਜ ਪਿਆਰੇ) are also chosen to implement the decisions. People are chosen for the particular task for which they have experience and specialist skills. They do not get blanket authority to do what they want. There can be multiple groups of people chosen for different tasks. Sikh's do not have history of electing entertaining dangerous clowns with no right to recall and limitless powers over all matters for years as in so called 'modern' representative democracy. *Sarbat Khalsa* is in active use today among the Sikhs at community and local level.

Justice for the people

In modern 'enlightened' democracies, there is two-tier justice system. The justice people get depends on how close people are to the government. There is selective enforcement of justice all over the world. Laws are interpreted differently.

Neil Gorsuch is an Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court. He writes in his book 'Over Ruled: The Human Toll of Too Much Law'.

Those who feel the cost most acutely are those without wealth, power, and status... The "sagacious, the enterprising, and the moneyed few" may be able to anticipate, influence, and even profit from so much shifting law. But the "industrious... mass of the people" can do none of those things. In the end, law serves as an instrument only "for the few, not for the many (Neil Gorsuch, 2024).

Most modern 'democratic' Nation-States follow the principle of "Show me the man and I'll show you the crime" (Laventia Beria, 2018). Law and Justice today *ignore* individual liberty. Law and Justice today have become an end to itself rather than a means to an end (individual liberty). Law and Justice today serve the 'the enterprising, and the moneyed few' rather than the people.

The rule of law is not an end unto itself. In large measure, it is about protecting individual liberty (Neil Gorsuch, 2024).

In contrast, the First Sikh Kingdom was "relentlessness in his punishment of tyrannical officials". Sikh Kingdom upheld 'individual liberty'. Modern enlightened Western Nations and democracies do not. Prof. Ganda Singh writes about Banda Singh Bahadar:

His justice was expeditious and he sometimes went to the extent of relentlessness in his punishment of tyrannical officials. The rank and position of the offender never influenced his spirit of justice and his summary method of dealing with criminal cases made him a terror to the tribe of petty functionaries. In his zeal for the emancipation of the persecuted and down-trodden, he earned the blessings of the poor and the destitute whose cries had not been heard by anyone for centuries past (Singh P. G., 1935).

Conclusion

The First Sikh Kingdom of Banda Singh Bahadar lasted about 5 years (1710-15). Keeping in mind that the First Sikh Kingdom had a short reign and was

constantly under attack by forces that controlled 25% of the world's economy, the achievements of the First Sikh Kingdom are nothing less than spectacular.

The administration and governance model can be summarized as follows:

- **Ended feudal system** and granted rights of land to those who tilled the land. This empowered the farmers to be more productive and have ownership of the land and their produce.
- **Direct Revenue Collection** by abolishing feudal lords as middlemen. Taxes were collected in kind directly by the State officials as share of the revenue rather than in cash.
- **Epistocracy:** governance by experts, rule of the learned. Epistocrats of Sikh Kingdom were the *Khalsa*.
- Established a form of **direct democracy** with group of affected and concerned citizens getting together (*Sarbat Khalsa*) to take decisions via consensus.
- **Justice for the people:** “relentlessness in his punishment of tyrannical officials”, and upholding individual liberty.

Banda Singh Bahadar was subsequently captured along with 700 Sikhs by an army of more than 35,000 Mughals. He and his followers were taken to Delhi. His son was killed in front of him. He was tortured to death. His closest followers were given option that their life will be spared if they renounced Sikh values and convert to Islam. Not even one out of more than 700 converted.

The First Sikh Kingdom of Banda Singh Bahadar was a milestone in the history of Indus Valley Civilization and for the Sikhs. It put them on path to inter-generational wealth by making them owners of their land. It gave physical and political manifestation to Sikh philosophy of Guru Nanak. It continues to inspire Sikhs today.

از نانک و گوبندک
 نضر ملی دیر تک یافت
 دلچ تیک

Nanak
 Singh
 Yafat Bedrang Nusrat
 Fateh
 Wa Teg Degh



Seal of Banda Singh Bahadar

Seal is read from bottom right to top left because seal is in Persian
– a right to left language.

Inscription reads:

Deg Teg Fateh, Nusrat (grace) Bedrang (without delay), Yafat (prosperity) Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh.

Translated as:

Fateh (victory) from Deg (pot) and Tegh (sword);
Prosperity without delay by the grace of
(Guru) Nanak, and Guru Gobind Singh

(Image and description courtesy of Tanvir Singh)

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