



Research Article

THE AKALI STRUGGLE AT THREE IMPORTANT HISTORICAL GURDWARAS

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ABSTRACT

The Akali Movement from 1920 to 1925 has occupied a very important place not only in the Sikh history but also in the regional and national history. The management of Gurdwaras and misuse of their property by Mahants became the immediate cause of agitation. The Sikhs made great sacrifices for the construction, maintenance and protection of the Gurdwaras. Peaceful agitation was adopted by Akalis as a weapon to fight the vested interests in Sikh Shrines. This weapon proved very effective. The Akalis were supposed to take the oath that they would not resort to violence. True spirit of non-violence of Akalis was most striking feature of the Akali Movement. The Akali struggle directed against the priests, mahants and other vested interests in the Sikh shrines and consequently against the British imperialism was one of the most powerful movement of the modern India. The Akali Movement was stopped in 1925, when Sikh Gurdwaras and Shrines Bill (The Sikh Gurdwara Act VIII of 1925) was passed on 28th July 1925. The Act provided for control of all historic shrines by elected body called Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (S.G.P.C).

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INTRODUCTION

Akali movement was essentially inspired by the social, religious and political awakening among the Sikhs. The management of Gurdwaras and misuse of their property by *Mahants* became the immediate cause of agitation. The Gurdwara struggle can be divided into three phases, initially it was directed against the corrupt *Mahants*. Then, it was turned against the government. In the first two phases it was broadly religious in character. In the third phase it assumed a political character, and also involved the Sikh Princely States. Over three hundred large and small Gurdwaras were liberated by the Akalis. The discussion has been confined only to the three important Sikh Shrines namely the Panja Sahib, Nankana Sahib and Darbar Sahib (Tarn Taran).ⁱ

Panja Sahib

The Gurdwara of Panja Sahib is situated at Hasan Abdal in Attock (district) of West Punjab (now in Pakistan). The Gurdwara is concerned with Guru Nanak Dev. On his return from the West Asian countries as Mecca and Baghdad, Guru Nanak Dev came to Hasan Abdal and stopped as usual at a little distance from the village at the foot of a hill. He sent Mardana, his rebeck player, to fetch water from a Mohammedan saint called Vali Qandhari whose seat was on the top of the hill. Mardana came back disappointed as the saint refused to give water and out of sulkiness threw a big boulder down the hill side to crush the rival saint.

The stone as it came down rolling was stopped by Guru Nanak Dev with his hand and spot where he touched it is mark by a figure of the hand cut into the stone. Subsequently this marked became an object of great reverence for the Sikhs who started calling it Panja Sahib. During the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh Gurdwara got *jagirs*. In 1906 *Mahant* Mitha Singh got the Gurdwara land transferred to his own name.ⁱⁱ

After the control over Harmandir Sahib and Akal Takhat by reformers, the condition of *Mahants* in other Gurdwaras weakened. They had not much hope of help from the Government. It was against this background that struggle for reform of Gurdwara Panja Sahib was renewed with increased vigour. At the time of the second meeting of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (S.G.P.C.), a telegraphic message was received that *Mahant* Mitha Singh of Gurdwara Panja Sahib had died. It was decided that Kartar Singh Jhabbar may go to Panja Sahib with 25 Singhs of the Central Majha Diwan. This *Jatha* reached Hasan Abdal on 19th November 1920, and they marched towards Panja Sahib in lines of four led by *Jathedar* Jhabbar. Amar Singh Jhabal also reached Panja Sahib. Sant Singh, the man who had the aspiration to succeed *Mahant* Mitha Singh, had no means to resist the *Jatha*, and he thought of using local head lums (*badmashes*) against the Singhs. The local Tehsildar was helpful to the Singhs. The *Jatha* of Malik Deva Singh also reached Panja Sahib, followed by some members of the Rawalpindi, Singh Sabha. Sant Singh's attempt to capture the Gurdwara was failed. The norm of *langar* was established in Gurdwara. A large number of Sikhs came to Panja Sahib at the time of Guru Nanak Dev's birthday.ⁱⁱⁱ

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When Bhai Kartar Singh *Jatha* was performing Kirtan, the new *Mahant* in a virulent speech declared that the Akalis had no concern with the temple and asked them to leave the premises immediately. The Akalis, insisted that the *Jatha* should be allowed to complete the *Kirtan* with four hymns still remaining. The *Mahant's* supporters stood up and began abusing Kartar Singh Jhabber and other members of his *Jatha* and thus a clash ensued. When news of this confrontation reached the town, other sympathizers and supporters of the reformers flocked to the Gurdwara. The Akali thought this to be an ideal opportunity to achieve their object. As a symbol of their having taken over the control of the Gurdwara, *Jathedar* Kartar Singh Jhabbar took possession of the cash box containing the daily offerings and declared the *Mahant* a *Tankhahia*, who was not allowed to enter the shrine till he went to the Akal Takhat to beg pardon for his acts. The *Mahant's* efforts to regain control of the Gurdwara failed. The Panja Sahib Gurdwara thus passed into the control of the reformers and a representative management committee was soon formed to look after it. With the passage of time *Mahant* agreed that landed property, which is at present entered in the name of the *Mahant*, be entered in the name of the shrine.^{iv}

Darbar Sahib, Tarn Taran

This city, about 22 kilometre from Amritsar, was founded by Guru Arjan Dev in 1590. The fifth Guru during his travels in the area between Ravi and Beas reached a village called Khara-Plasor. The natural ponds captivated him. The Guru constructed a holy tank by converting a natural depression into *Sarovar* (Holy Tank). The Gurdwara was built on one side of the *Sarovar*. During the *Misl* period this Gurdwara got *Jagirs* from the *Misldars*. Maharaja Ranjit Singh visited the shrine in 1802. He was largely responsible for the present structure of the Darbar Sahib. Compassion and benevolence have always been hallmarks of Sikhism, and Guru Arjan Dev had established a home for leprosy patients in Tarn Taran called Dukh Nivaran, literally, alleviating pain. A big *jagir* was attached to the Gurdwara and there was some land reserved for the maintenance and support of the lepers.^v

In early twentieth century this Gurdwara came under the possession of *Mahants*. The priests or *Mahants* were more independent. They divided the whole income among themselves. The condition of the Gurdwara was immoral. The morals of some of the priests were the most shocking. Sometimes the priests came drunk to the Gurdwara. They openly called the Gurdwara their shop. Theft was most common among them. No woman's honor was safe in the Gurdwara. The conflict between the Akalis and the government ensued in January 1921. Bhai Mohan Singh Vaid, a local leader of the reform movement, is said to have invited the attention of the *Mahants* to the evils prevalent in the system of management and respectfully asked them to improve their ways. Bhai Lachhman Singh is also said to have made a similar plea. He and the girls of the school were not allowed to enter the Gurdwara to recite *Shabads*. The *Mahant* (Arur Singh) of Tarn Taran had refused the local Akali *Jatha* to arrange for the recitation of Holy Scriptures (*Asa-di-Var*) on 11th January 1921. The *Jatha* was attacked with *lathies*. The *Mahant* of the Gurdwara at Tarn Taran flouted his authority and indulged in all sorts of indecencies. *Jatha* of the Akalis went there in January 1921, to ask *Mahant* to mend his ways and requested him to come to terms with the committee elected

by the Panth. The *Mahant* attacked the unarmed, the non-violent *Jatha*.^{vi}

One such story narrated by a woman visitor on 29th January 1921, before a general meeting of the Sikhs at Akal Takhat, is said to have created a great sensation arousing the assembled Akalis to immediately march towards Tarn Taran in order to purify the place. The next morning about 40 Akalis under the leadership of Bhai Teja Singh Bhuchar reached. The alarmed priests whose number was estimated to be 70, tried to provoke the Akalis but a clash was avoided through a compromise. The priests agreed to the formation of a joint committee to settle the dispute which was a trick to gain time to prepare them for an attack. They even announced at night their decision to accept the proposals and asked the Akalis to bring a fair copy of the document to be signed by them. While the Akalis were waiting for the document to be signed, the priests, instead of returning the document, mounted an attack. It was around 9.00pm that the dead-drunk priests pounced upon the peaceful and unsuspecting Akalis. The priests used *lathies*, daggers and brickbats. The holy place was soon smeared with the blood of the wounded Akali volunteers. Bhai Hukam Singh and Bhai Hazara Singh were the first martyrs of the movement. These two persons sacrificed their lives and 17 Akalis were critically injured. Some members of the *Jatha* who were inside the Gurdwara were seriously wounded.^{vii} The district official reached Gurdwara on the morning of 26 January to discover that the Akalis were injured. The manager and *Pujari* of the Darbar Sahib were barred from entering the Gurdwara. It was occupied by the Akalis. A local committee of management was provisionally formed. It was generally believed that aggression of the erstwhile managers of the shrine had been tacitly encouraged by C.M. King, the Commissioner of Lahore Division. The Tarn Taran Gurdwara came under control of the S.G.P.C. During this struggle the Akalis had to shed their blood for the first time.^{viii}

Nankana Sahib

Nankana Sahib is the birth-place of Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikhism. Nankana Sahib, originally Talwandi of Rai Bhoie, is 65 kilometer southwest of Lahore in district Sheikhupura in West Punjab (now in Pakistan).^{ix} The cause of the strike between the Akalis and *Mahants* was that the Akali leadership had the strong conviction that the placing of Gurdwara and shrines under the control of the community would be in the larger interests of the country. Therefore, they did not want them to remain in the hands of the generally corrupt and reactionary *Mahants*, who were serving the British interests. Several shrines were occupied in 1920 and early part of 1921 under circumstances amounting to intimidation. The Government attitude was based on a desire to keep clear of religious controversy and *Mahants* who asked for assistance were referred to the ordinary law. The *Mahants* were lazy, dissolute and irreligious, that the Gurdwara was frequented by drunkards, fornicators and scoundrels. Matter came to head in connection with the shrine at Nankana Sahib, one of the richest in the province, which was administered by a *Mahant* who was a notorious ill-liver.^x

During early 20th century the Gurdwara Janam Asthan came to be controlled by *Mahant* Narian Das who was leading an irreligious and licentious life. With the passage of time, he started practicing the usual vices. He is said to have kept a Mohammedan drummer's wife, invited dancing girls to

Nankana Sahib and permitted profane singing even in the sacred precincts of Janam Asthan. Local Sikhs threatened to eject him by force. The *Mahant* asked the police for protection and hired nearly 400 *thugs* to safeguard and defend his interest. The Punjab Government provided him with a guard and weapons for defense like swords, *lathis*, *chavis*, *takwas* and other lethal weapons. Arms, ammunition and kerosene were kept in stock.^{xi}

On 24th January 1921, a resolution was passed by the S.G.P.C calling upon the whole *Panth* to assemble in a Diwan at Nankana Sahib from 4th to 6th March 1921, and to impress upon the *Mahant* the need for reform. *Jathedar* Kartar Singh Jhabbar planned a forcible seizure of the Gurdwara. The Sikhs demanded resignation of Narian Das. On the contrary, the Punjab Government provided him with a guard and weapons for defence. On 20th February, 1921, a band of about 130 Sikhs under the leadership of Lachman Singh Dharowalia entered the courtyard of the shrine. *Jathedar* Kartar Singh Jhabbar and Bhai Lachhman Singh had planned direct non-violent action to reform Gurdwara Janam Asthan. The S.G.P.C. leaders came to know of this and they also knew of Narian Das's preparations. They sent Harchand Singh, Teja Singh Samundri and Master Tara Singh to stop the Akalis from going to the Gurdwara. On 19th February they succeeded in contracting Kartar Singh Jhabbar, and he accepted their advice.^{xii}

Jhabbar's autobiography enumerates the details of a plan purportedly drawn by him. The visiting leaders then deputed Bhai Dalip Singh to stop the other *Jathas*, which were to meet Jhabbar's *Jatha* at predetermined rendezvous. He was given a horse and three horsemen Waryam Singh Garmula, Gurdit Singh Jhindwala and Ram Singh to escort him. Bhai Waryam Singh went to the north of Janam Asthan and saw the *Jatha* of Bhai Lachhman Singh coming on Kot Darbar Road. He gave the letter to Bhai Lachhman Singh after reading the letter, Bhai Lachhman Singh directed the *Jatha* to go back. When the *Jatha* was turning back, Bhai Tehal Singh said "Khalsa Ji I had come after saying the prayer that I shall attain martyrdom at Nankana Sahib. Therefore, if you wish, you may go back, but I shall not return". Saying this, he started off alone towards the Gurdwara. Many Sikhs from the *Jatha* called him back, but he did not return. Upon this, Bhai Lachhman Singh also started towards the Gurdwara along with his *Jatha*. Bhai Lachhman Singh's wife, a lady teacher, and another lady who had joined on the way were also with the *Jatha*. The ladies were sent to Gurdwara Tamba Sahib from where they went back home. The *Jatha* entered the Gurdwara shouting *Jaikaras* sending about 60 hoodlums deployed by the *Mahant* to run away.^{xiii}

Armed *Pathans* and desperadoes hired by the *Mahant* fell upon the peaceful *Jatha*. The doors of the *Gurdwara* were closed by guards of the *Mahant*. The *Jatha* was brutally massacred. A large number of the wounded were also burnt alive with kerosene oil. The excitement caused by this incident was naturally tremendous. The feeling was not only confined to the Punjab alone but the whole Indian nation was shocked at this most outrageous murder. In the face of inhuman treatment by the hirelings of the *Mahant*, the Akalis showed tremendous spirit of non-violence. Appreciating their non-violent struggle, Mahatma Gandhi issued an appeal saying. "The work is not solely of the Sikhs, everybody should share it" the tragedy of Nankana Sahib was still fresh in the minds of the people when the government resorted to repressive measures to suppress the movement of the Akalis. It did not succeed in this and soon

began to send feelers to the Gurdwara committee for a compromise.^{xiv}

The massacre of the Sikhs in retaliation by *Mahant* and his followers added fuel to fire of the Sikh discontent. High officials were accused of conniving the massacre and Sikh passions were inflamed to a high degree. News of the Nankana Sahib massacre shocked the country. Immediately after the incident all extreme and fanatic Sikhs of the Province flocked to Nankana Sahib. The S.G.P.C. sent Akali *Jathas* to Nankana Sahib. According to Giani Ram Singh Grewal, who himself led a *Jatha* of 50 students to Nankana Sahib after the gruesome tragedy; it was *Mahant* Narian Dass who was the sole man behind this tragedy.^{xv}

The Commissioner King, Deputy Commissioner Currie, and the D.I.G. of the Central Range arrived in Nankana Sahib with 100 British and 100 Indian troops. *Mahant* Narian Das was arrested together with two of his disciples and twenty-six of his hired Pathans. Gurdwara Janam Asthan was placed under guard on 21st February 1921, *Jathedar* Kartar Singh Jhabbar marched towards Nankana Sahib at the head of 2,200 Akalis under eleven *Jathedars*. The officers warned him not to advance, but he told the *Jathas* to reach the Janam Asthan to take its control even if they have to face bullets. After a brief consultation the Deputy Commissioner agreed to hand over the keys of the Gurdwara to Jhabbar, and the *Jathedar* agreed to the formation of a management committee. The Sikhs got moral support from Hindus and Muslims. The whole nation stood with the Sikh community even Mahatma Gandhi referred to their martyrdom as an act of national bravery.^{xvi} Bhai Jodh Singh, Naraian Singh and other members of the S.G.P.C. present at Nankana Sahib formed themselves into a Committee. It took charge of the keys of Nankana Sahib Gurdwara from Commissioner, Lahore on behalf of the S.G.P.C.. At that time although the S.G.P.C. had not been registered as a body, it had come into existence. Harbans Singh Attari became the president of the committee and Naraian Singh was appointed as manager of the Gurdwara. The Committee directed Naraian Singh to take charge of the Gurdwara till other arrangement was not made.^{xvii} National leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Shaukat Ali, Dr. Kitchlew, Lala Duni Chand and Lala Lajpat Rai, visited the scene of the tragedy and expressed sympathy for the Akalis. Prominent Sikh leaders, members of the Punjab Legislative Council, the Sikh League, the Chief Khalsa Diwan and other Sikh organizations reached the spot.^{xviii}

Sardar Sangat Singh, Legislative member asked the British Government about the number of the Akalis killed and wounded in this tragedy.^{xix} The police investigation at Nankana revealed the fact that about 130 persons were killed on 20th February in the Nankana Sahib massacre.^{xx} The evidence which had been recorded in the commitment proceeding showed that the killing came to an end probably about 9 A.M. and certainly before 11 A.M. but Deputy Commissioner arrived at 12:30 P.M. This evidence also showed that killing was continued even after the Deputy Commissioner's arrival. The Sikhs strongly said that government officials were also responsible for the Nankana sahib tragedy. High official were accused of conniving the massacre and the Sikh passions were inflamed to a high degree. The Sikhs as a whole including the Sikh members of the Punjab Legislative Council as well as Legislative Assembly complained to the Punjab

Government that the enquiry in the Nankana Sahib was not in proper hands.^{xxi}

The Anglo-Indian press called it a 'riot' an 'affray', a 'fight', a disturbance of a sectarian character. To the Indians the Nankana tragedy was an unprecedented event in which the 'cold blooded murders' of innocent pilgrims had taken place.^{xxii} Several Indian newspapers published articles on Nankana Sahib tragedy. Newspapers played very important role after the Nankana Sahib tragedy. They provided real information and truth about Nankana Sahib to the whole India. Sardul Singh Cavessar was arrested at Lahore under section 124A and 153A, Indian Penal Code for the articles, which were published shortly after the Nankana Sahib tragedy when there was considerable excitement. These articles were related to Nankana Sahib Tragedy and published in Akali newspaper at Lahore.^{xxiii} Sardar Mehtab Singh said that the Sikhs had paid great installments of sacrifice. The first installment was of the Tarn Taran affair and Nankana Sahib tragedy. The second installment was of repression which swept over the Shekhupura district, in particular, soon after the tragedy. About 150 Akalis were arrested and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. They had to be released within a couple of months where the leader was imprisoned for 18 years and the others were for 7 years.^{xxiv} The government desired to see the Gurdwara matter satisfactorily settled. It approved of the property in such cases being definitely assigned to the shrines and not to the incumbent.^{xxv}

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