



Gurdwara reform movement 1920-1925

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Abstract

This paper offers a historical narrative of management of Sikhs shrines, formation of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandak Committee and Akali Dal and their struggle for the liberation of their Gurdwaras or holy shrines. After the struggle of five years to assert their rights, Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandak Committee, a representative body of Sikhs became the custodian of all the Gurdwaras.

Keywords: gurdwara, shiromani gurdwara prabandak committee, akali dal

Introduction

Gurdwaras are the places of worship for the Sikhs. The Guru, the Granth and the Gurdwara - these religious structures have traditionally been the centers of the religious, social, cultural and political life of the Sikhs^[1]. Wherever Guru Nanak Dev Ji went, he established the institution of 'Sangat' and 'Pangat'. A 'Sangat' with an injunction to build Dharmshala^[2] with the purpose of meeting in a common forum. But with the passage of time these 'Dharmshalas' became a centre of Sikh community. The institution of the 'Sangat' and the 'Pangat' continued and progressed under the successors of Guru Nanak. The 'Masands' and the 'Sangats' became the central organization of the Sikhs to propagate the teachings of the Guru and for the collection of funds. The 'Masands' and the persons who were placed in charge of various Gurdwaras were in tune with the advice of Guru Nanak. They wished to dedicate their life to prayer and service of the Community^[3]. With the passage of time 'Masands' developed into disruptive force and Guru Gobind Singh Ji abolished the institution of the 'Masands'. After the death of Banda Bahadur in 1716 upto the rise of the Misaldars a period of terror and persecution followed the orders of Mughal Emperors and their Governors in Punjab. In the ensuing period of persecution, Sikhs were continuously fleeing to escape Mughal oppression, thus the Gurdwaras came under the control of Udasis^[4]. Gradually, the Udasis in charge of various gurdwaras were also well versed in the Sikh scriptures and devoted themselves chiefly to reciting the teachings of the Sikh Gurus^[5]. Most of them established institutions, admitted followers and became heads of their deras and Gurdwaras and came to be known as the Mahants. During the Misl rule, the Sikh rulers and there after under Maharaja Ranjit Singh assigned large estates to these gurdwaras. The Mahants became inherited masters of the sacred shrines, gave up all symptoms of Sikhism excepting the beard and turban. Though the Mahants were known as managers and not the owners of the Gurdwaras. With the establishment of British rule, new settlement records had to be made. In many of these, the lands and properties attached to gurdwaras were entered against the names of the mahants^[6]. As the properties and incomes of the gurdwaras increased by

canal irrigation and offerings, the mahants became more and more depraved. Bad Characters flocked around them as chelas to lead easy and immoral lives.

The Mahants also started marrying in order to create lives of hereditary succession with an avowed purpose of retaining their hold on the gurdwara properties. No man's honour and no Women's virtue was safe.... Mahants kept mistresses and concubines and in doing so did not confine themselves to their own community. From prostitutes they had sons whom they provided with millions worth of properties out of Gurdwara funds^[7].

After the Nirankari and Namdhari movements, the Singh Sabha Movement was established by the Sikhs for improving the condition of the Sikhs in 1873. The main objectives of the Sabha were the revival of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. From 1880, the Singh Sabha movement had begun propagating for reforms in the Gurdwaras and for the removal of illiteracy among the Sikhs. This movement awoke the Sikhs and prepared the ground for the genesis of Gurdwara Reform Movement directed against the Mahants and other vested interests in Sikh shrines on the one hand and against the British imperialism in Punjab on the other.

The Sikh and pro-Sikh newspapers also took initiative for the reforms and propagating against the management of the gurdwaras. *The Punjab* reminded the Mahants that the gurdwaras belong to the Sikh community and not to the priests, who were mere servants of the Panth^[8]. Singh Sabha and Chief Khalsa Dewan also began passing resolutions condemning the Mahants and exhorting them to change their ways. In 1906, Chief Khalsa Dewan passed a resolution and asked the Government for the rules pertaining to the management of the Darbar Sahib to be changed as to allow the Sikh community the right to appoint its manager and other officials^[9]. But it went without any success. After having failed at the resolutions and petitions. Now Sikhs felt the need to get free their gurdwaras from the immoral priests. The Gurdwara Reform Movement started by the Sikhs to get free their gurdwaras from priests. When the Government took the side of the priests, Sikhs held morchas to get free their gurdwaras.

At that time Sikhs had no central organization, although some Sikh Jathas had been formed. Now the Sikhs wanted to establish a central organization. So they decided that the Sikhs should have a representative body of their own to manage all Sikh Gurdwaras. At that time Jethadar of Akal Takht came to the forefront for this, and a hukamnama was issued from the Akal Takht summoning a general assembly of the Sikhs to meet on 15th November, 1920, in the Golden Temple for the purpose of making a representative Committee of the panth to control all the Gurdwaras. Invitations were sent by the Jethadar of Akal Takht to the four Takhts, the Gurdwaras, Schools, Colleges, the Sikhs in the army and other Sikh organizations to send their representatives to meet in a Conference ^[10]. The meeting was held on 15th and 16th November, 1920. A Committee of one hundred and seventy five members was formed to control all the Gurdwaras of the Sikhs whether in Punjab or elsewhere. The 36 members of Committee nominated by the Government were also included in this Committee and named it as 'The Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee' i.e. the S.G.P.C. ^[11] The inaugural meeting of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee was held at the Akal Takht on December 12, 1920. The Committee thus elected Sunder Singh Majithia as its first President, Harbans Singh Attari as vice President and Sunder Singh Ramgarhia as Secretary ^[12].

To meet their objectives, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee decided on 14 December, 1920, that the movement should organize to work for the reforms in the Gurdwaras, under the direction of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. A central organization of Akalis was established, which was named as Shiromani Akali Dal ^[13]. Sardar Sardul Singh Caveeshar was appointed as the first president of Shiromani Akali Dal.

Now many Akali Jathas were sent to various historical Gurdwaras to liberate them from the Mahants and handed over to the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. ^[14] Though outwardly the British Government adopted the neutral policy but actually encouraged the Mahants to adopt stiffer attitude towards the Akali reformers and supported them by declaring "any person who attempts to forcibly oust any Mahant... is liable to punishment under the law" ^[15]. The Mahants of prominent Gurdwaras like Panja Sahib, Taran-Taran, Nankana Sahib and Guru-ka-Bagh did not agree to handover their Gurdwaras.

The Nankana Holocaust

Nankana, the birth place of Guru Nanak was most richly endowed Sikh shrine. After the death of Mahant Sadhu Ram, Narain Das managed the Janam Asthan. Narain Das lived in the Gurdwara with a mistress and was known to have invited prostitute to dance in the sacred premises ^[16]. Though Sikhs wanted to eject him forcefully but the Mahant had the backing of local officials and hired nearly 400 thugs to safeguard and defend his interest. In early morning hours on 20 Feb, 1921, a jatha of 130 Sikhs under the leadership of Lachman Das Dharowalia entered the Gurdwara. The gates of the shrine were closed and the thugs of Narain Das attacked the non-violent and bare handed Jatha with swords and hatchets and fire arms. According to Contemporary sources, Mahant Narain Das was himself supervising the whole show and urging his

men to spare no long haired Sikh in the whole vicinity ^[17]. Within half an hour, 130 men were killed. The dead and dying Akalis were dragged to a pile of logs which had been collected and burnt with kerosene oil. Some of them were even burnt alive ^[18]. Gurdwara was taken over by the army. Several Sikh leaders and Sikh Sardars from Amritsar and other places reached Nankana Sahib. Jathedar Kartar Singh Jhabbar along with his 2200 Akalis marched towards Nankana to take possession of Gurdwara ^[19]. The Jatha was stopped by the police force at the order of Deputy Commissioner. But the Jatha ignored the order of the police and marched towards the Gurdwara and took control of the Gurdwara ^[20]. Now the Deputy Commissioner of Lahore handed over the keys to the representatives of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee and also more than half a dozen local gurdwaras surrendered their shrines to it.

Guru ka Bagh

At Guru ka Bagh, a serious conflict took place between the Akalis and the British Government. Guru ka Bagh is located in the village Ghukkewali about 20 kilometers from Amritsar. The Gurdwara was under the control of mahant Sunder Das. He accepted baptism and submitted himself to the authority of an elected committee of management consisting of 11 members appointed by Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee on 23th August 1921. But the land of the Gurdwara remained under his possession. The Sikhs used to cut firewood from that land for Langer. The Mahant lodged a complaint against cutting the firewood. On 9 August 1922 five Akali sewadars were arrested by the police and charged them with criminal trespass. Akalis held a meeting at Guru ka Bagh where police dispersed them and arrested leaders, including Mehtab Singh and Master Tara Singh ^[21]. The Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee took the Challenge and decided to launch a morcha and Jathas of 100 Akalis each were formed, which proceeded towards Guru Ka Bagh. For 19 days, the encounter between the police and passive resisters continued ^[22]. 5605 Akalis had been arrested and thousands were injured.

Lt-Governor of Punjab Sir Edward Maclagan visited Guru Ka Bagh on 13th September 1922 and stopped the beating of Sikh volunteers. The offices of Sir Ganga Ram were utilized to resolve the situation. Sir Ganga Ram acquired the garden land on lease from Mahant Sunder Dass on 17th November 1922. He allowed the Akalis access to the garden. On 27 April, 1923 Punjab Government issued orders for the releases of the prisoners. The Akalis took possession of Guru Ka Bagh along with disputed land. It was the second decisive battle won.

Jaito Morcha

Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha was deposed by the British Government. Because Maharaja of Nabha had sympathies with the nationalists and Akali movement. ^[23] The S.G.P.C. pledged full support to the Maharaja. From July 1923 onwards, an Akhand Path of Guru Granth Sahib was begun in Jaito in Nabha State for the reinstatement of the deposed Maharaja Ripudaman Singh. On 1st September, it was decided to send Jathas comprising 25 Akalis to force the issue. The police tried to stop the Akhand Path through repressive methods. These Akalis were arrested by the State police. The

S.G.P.C decided to send daily Jathas to Jaito from the Akal Takhat at Amritsar. The protestors were arrested, beaten and kick dragged them into the Jaito Fort ^[24]. By an order dated 12 October 1923, the Government of Punjab declared S.G.P.C and S.A.D as unlawful bodies and 59 Akali leaders were arrested ^[25]. The Indian National Congress declared its full support to the Akali movement. Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru, K. Santhanam and A.T. Gidwani, who were members of the All India Congress Committee, joined the Akali Jatha. They were arrested and sent to Nabha Jail.²⁶ Finally, Government of Punjab relented and agreed to transfer the control of the Gurdwara to the Akalis.

While the Jaito morcha was going on, a second front was opened at Bhai Pheru. The Akalis also sought the control of Gurdwara at Bhai Pheru. The shrine at Bhai Pheru was known for its importance and wealth in Lahore district. The property attached to the shrine included some 5000 acres of land, mostly irrigated and a jagir worth Rs.5000. The gurdwara was controlled by Udasi Mahant including Pala Ram, the brother of Narain Das. The Mahant agreed to transfer the control of the gurdwara to S.G.P.C, after being offered a pension. However, in August 1923, the Akalis decided to eject the Mahant. On 4 December 1923, a group of Akalis damaged the mahants room ^[27]. The police arrested 11 Akalis following a complaint.

About the middle of December, the Government recognized the S.G.P.C as the manager of the gurdwara, but also warned the Akalis that if they desired to eject the Mahant, they must do so by legal process. On 1 January 1924 Akali Jatha forcibly took the possession of the gurdwara. In subsequent days, a number of Akali Jathas staged demonstration at the site. A total of 5251 persons were arrested and out of which 3092 of these were sent to the prison.

A bill accommodating their demands was moved in the Punjab Legislative Council and passed into law in 1925, under the title of the Sikh Gurdwara Act, 1925. As this legislation was put on the statute book, almost all historical shrines, numbering 241 as listed in Schedule I of the Act, were declared as Sikh Gurdwaras and they were to be under the administrative control of the Central Board, later named the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. Procedure was also laid down in section 7 of the Act for the transfer of any gurdwara not listed in Schedules I and II to the administrative control of the Central Board with the passage of this Act, the Akali agitation ceased. In the Akali agitation for gurdwara reform, nearly forty thousand went to jail. Four hundred lost their lives while two thousand suffered injuries. Sums to the tune of sixteen lakhs of rupees were paid by way of fines and about seven hundred Sikh Government functionaries in the villages were deprived of their positions.

Conclusion

Gurdwara Reform Movement (1920-1925), the struggle of five years, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee and the Akali Dal had won against the Mahants and the Government and obtained the control over all the important Sikh Gurdwaras. The Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee became the apex power and an autonomous body of the Sikhs by the Sikh Gurdwara Act of 1925.

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