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Gurdwara Reform Movement: An Appraisal 1920-25

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ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with the Gurdwara Reform Movement from 1920 to 1925. It covers the detail about the various aspects of the gurdwara like their origin, the holocaust and tragedies occurred at these gurdwaras and the changing pattern of management in these gurdwara with the passage of time. The paper is divided into two sections, the first section provides the detail about incident and event which were related with these gurdwaras in chronological order. The second section provides the detail about the formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, the implementation of the centralized management on these gurdwaras and concludes the paper.

Keywords: **Gurdwara, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Religious Reform Movement, Akali Dal, Legislation, Morchas**

Introduction

Earlier, the places of worship of the Sikhs were known by the name of 'Dharamsal', which literally meant a religious place, or a religious rest house. It generally denoted a building used for devotional singing and prayers. So to begin with, the place where the *sangat* congregated was known as *Dharamsal* and later on when Guru Granth Sahib was proclaimed as the Guru by the tenth Master and it was installed in the *Dharamsal* then it came to be called as Gurdwara. It is not merely the building, which is so important, yet it is the gathering together of the Sikhs in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, which gives the gurdwara special place in Sikh life. Religious celebrations commemorating the historical events are also celebrated in the gurdwara.¹ With the expansion of the Sikh community, both geographically and numerically the need for new indirect management emerged. This can be seen in the *Manji* system and *Masand* system. The third Guru Amar Das founded a new organization to cater the needs of the increasing *sangat* and to propagate the Sikh faith further. He divided the whole country under his spiritual influence into twenty two *manjis* (cot). The person in charge of each *manji* or centre was called *manjidar* as he was to preside over the *sangat* and propagate Sikhism by sitting over the *manji* while the *sangat* sat on the floor.² The fourth Guru Ram Das, upgraded and reorganized the existing system to make the missionary work more effective and comprehensive. The

¹ Surinder Singh Johar, *The Sikh Guru and their Shrines*, Delhi, Vivek Publishing Company, 1976, p. 28.

² Ibid., p. 44.

missionaries got a new name *masand*.³ The word *masand* is also having the similar meaning as *manji* or cot, which was used by the Sikh missionary earlier. It meant deputy or agent of the Guru. Some scholars are of view that the word *masand* came to be used during the pontificate of Guru Arjan Dev.⁴ They were full time religious preachers. It was the duty of the *masands* to collect the offering from the Sikhs and deposit in Guru's treasury twice a year, on the Diwali and Baisakhi day, and to report on the work of religious propagation. In the 18th century period, the clean shaven people called mahants managed the gurdwaras fairly well and conducted themselves very creditably. The income of these gurdwaras being very small there was no likelihood of the Mahants to be corrupt. However, later on they became corrupt and they used the income of the gurdwara for their personal work. They occupied the gurdwaras property and grabbed the agricultural land from the manager of the gurdwaras. The main aim of the gurdwara reform movement was to free the gurdwaras from the clutches of these corrupt mahants. With these aims, some intellectual and devoted Sikh persons started the gurdwara reform movement. The paper is divided into two sections, the first section provides the detail about incident and event which are related with these gurdwaras in chronological order. The second section provides the detail about the formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, implementation of the centralized management of these gurdwaras and concludes the paper.

Section-I

This section covers the detail of the various gurdwaras which played a major role in the gurdwara reform movement. These gurdwaras became a cause of disagreement about the issue of manabetween the British authority and the Sikh community.

Gurdwara Babe-di-Ber

Chronologically, the first Gurdwara to be reformed through agitation was Babe-di-Ber at Sialkot. The gurdwara built in memory of Guru Nanak's visit to that place, came to be popularly known as Babe-di-Ber because the Guru sat under a *Ber* tree at there.⁵ This was the first place where the tussle was started between the British authority and the Sikh reformers. The issue of the tussle was that when Harnam Singh the Mahant of this gurdwara was died, his widow had her minor son appointed as successor under the guardianship of one Ganda Singh an Honorary Magistrate. There was a wave of resentment among the Sikhs throughout the Punjab against this action and various Singh Sabhas protest against this. But the protest was curbed by the British authority.

The Golden Temple and Akal Takht

Corrupt and non-Sikh practices in the precincts of the Golden Temple and the Akal Takht at Amritsar and official control over its management had been a source of great

³ Mohinder Singh, *The Akali Movement*, New Delhi: Macmillan Company, 1977, p. 2.

⁴ G.S Nayyer, *The Rise and Fall of Masands*, Journal-The Spokesman Weekly, Annual Number 1981, p. 61.

⁵ For a detailed account, see Giani Kartar Singh, *Babe-di-Ber Sialkot*, pp. 10-15.

discontent among the Sikhs long before the beginning of the movement for reform.⁶ While the reformers were anxious to free these central seats of the Sikh religion from evil influences and from official control as early as possible, the British authorities in the Punjab resisted any effort at reform or change in the existing system of management which would deprive it of the privilege of using (rather misusing) the religious places of the Sikhs to consolidate their power and to weaken their political opponents.⁷ The Government appointed *Sarbrah* (managers of the gurdwaras) used the huge donations of the gurdwaras for their personal works. Costly gifts to the gurdwaras slowly found their way to the homes of the *Sarbrah* and other priests. The precincts began to be used by *Pundits* and astrologers; idols were openly worshipped in the gurdwara premises. With the general awakening among them in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Sikhs began to resent these increasingly evil influences. Realizing that any attempt at purification and improvement was not possible until the gurdwaras were freed from official control. Therefore, some intellectual Sikhs were organized and they started the gurdwara reform movement.

Gurdwara Panja Sahib

Gurdwara Panja Sahib was also under the control of the corrupt *mahant* who used the offering of the gurdwara for his personal life. The story of incident of Panja Sahib was that a *Jatha*⁸ of 25 Akalis was marched from Amritsar under the leadership of Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabbar and it reached Panja Sahib on 18 November 1920. The next day when the *Jatha* was performing *Kirtan*, the new Mahant in a virulent speech declared that the Akalis had no concern with the gurdwara and asked them to leave the gurdwara immediately. The Akalis on the other hand, insisted that the *Jatha* should be allowed to complete the *Kirtan*. While the *Jatha* was still performing the *Kirtan* with four hymns still remaining, the Mahant supporters stood up and began abusing Kartar Singh Jhabbar and other members of his *Jatha* and thus a clash ensued. The Akalis 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 to be allowed to enter the shrine till he went to the Akal Takht 'to beg pardon for his acts.'⁹ The mahant's efforts to regain control of the gurdwara failed and the Gurdwara Panja Sahib thus passed into the control of the reformers and a representative management committee was soon formed to look after it.

The Darbar Sahib, Tarn Taran

The Gurdwara Darbar Sahib situated within fifteen kilometers of the city of Amritsar had been under the same management as that of the Golden Temple and the Akal

⁶ *The District Gazetteer of Amritsar 1883-84*, Lahore: The Government of Punjab, 1884, p. 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*,

⁸ The *Jatha* meaning is a group of Sikh people.

⁹ Kartar Singh Jhabbar, *Akali Morche-te-Jhabbar*, Delhi: National Book Shop, 1967, pp. 79-80.

Takht.¹⁰ During the days of Arur Singh, *Mahants* of Tarn Taran became more or less independent and introduced many evil practices within the precincts of the gurdwara. The local leaders of reform movements asked the *mahants* to improve their ways but there was no effect in *mahants* behavior. Once a local *jatha* advised the *mahant* to arrange for the recitation of *Asa-di-Var* on 11 January 1921, instead of listening to the members of *jatha*, the *Mahants* are said to have beaten up the members of the *jatha* with *lathis*.¹¹ Later on, the compromise was made between the *mahant* and the local reformers through the Commissioner of Lahore. However, the *mahant* did not change his behavior. The news of the immoral practices were coming from the side of the *manaht*. For the permanent solution of this problem, the number of 40 Sikhs reached at Tarn Taran for the deliberation with the *mahant*. The *mahant* agreed to the formation of a Joint Committee to settle the dispute, which was a trick to gain time to prepare themselves for an attack. They even announced at night their decision to accept the proposal 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 *mahant*, instead of returning the document, mounted an attack. Some of the members of the *jatha* who were inside the gurdwara were seriously wounded. The *mahant* used *lathis*, daggers and brick-bats. The holy place was soon smeared with the blood of the wounded Akali volunteers, two of whom succumbed to their injuries.¹² On receiving this news the District Magistrate and other officials rushed to the place to meet the leaders of both the parties. By an official order, the *mahant* was barred from entering the gurdwara until the matter was finally decided by the Parbandhak Committee. The gurdwara having thus come into hands of the reformers, a Provisional Committee of management was formed, pending the appointment of regular committee by the S.G.P.C.¹³

The Nankana Holocaust

Nankana, being the birth place of Guru Nanak, occupies the most important position among the Sikh places of religious worship. Apart from the gurdwara of Janam Asthan, where the Guru was born, there are over half a dozen other shrines connected with different events of the early life of the Guru.¹⁴ At Nankana Sahib the Mahant Narain Das after his appointment as the Mahant of Gurdwara Janam Asthan, he began to drift towards an immoral life. With the passage of time, he started practising the

¹⁰ The gurdwara Tarn Taran was founded by Guru Arjan Dev in 1500 A.D. Besides being a place of worship it is also a special refuge for lepers who still visit the place in thousands to get cured after a dip in the holy tank. Teja Singh, *Gurdwara Reform Movement and the Sikh awakening*, Jalandhar: Desh Sewak Agency, 1922, p. 197.

¹¹ Teja Singh, *Gurdwara Reform Movement*, p. 198.

¹² Mohan Singh Vaid, p. 372.

¹³ Teja Singh, *Gurdwara Reform Movement*, p. 198.

¹⁴ The names of others Gurdwaras are Gurdwara Bal Lila Sahib, Gurdwara Kiara Sahib, Gurdwara Mal Ji Sahib and Gurdwara Khara Sauda Sahib.

usual vices. He is said to have kept a Muhammadan drummer's wife, invited dancing girls in the complex of Gurdwara Nankana Sahib and permitted profane singing even in the sacred precincts of Janam Asthan. This state of affairs in Nankana Sahib attracted the attention of the Akali reformers. A resolution was passed calling upon Mahant Narain Das to improve his ways and cleanse the administration of the temple. But instead of reforming or even arriving at a compromise with the Akalis, Narain Das began to recruit a strong force to resist the Akali Movement. Further, on February 20, 1921, a batch of one hundred and fifty Sikhs came for obeisance at the gurdwara. Not only, they were not allowed to enter the sacred shrine but also the private army of Mahant Narain Das attacked them with arms and ammunition. The Sikhs were chanting sacred hymns. The attack was sudden and bullets were showered from all sides. Bhai Lachman Das, who had somehow managed to enter the shrine and was reciting Sri Guru Granth Sahib, was also fired on the spot. He died instantly while *gurbani* was on his lips. The holy book, too, was damaged and had on it stains of blood. Outside the main gate, the *Mahant* stood with a pistol in hand and riding on horseback directed the entire operations. He was shouting at the top of his voice, "Don't allow a single Sikh to go out alive, Finish them, finish them. Let nobody escape." The six person who stood nearby the Mahant were killed by the mahant's men and were thrown in the potter's kiln. Firewood and kerosene oil stored in the shrine were brought out and a fire was lighted. All the dead and injured were thrown into it and were consumed by fire in a matter of minutes. A few others were tied to a tree and were burnt alive.

As the news of these ghastly murders spread, the whole country was shocked. It excited great sympathy for the Sikhs and there was a demand for drastic action against the Mahant and his henchmen. Representations were made to the government. The Governor of Punjab visited the place of incident and was deeply moved by the sight of the ghastly scene. Mahatma Gandhi also visited the place a few days later. The government was forced to take action against the erring Mahant who was ultimately arrested with his hirelings. The government handed over the management of the gurdwara to a committee of seven Sikhs.

The Keys' Affair

The Golden Temple, the Akal Takht and the adjoining Gurdwaras had passed into the control of the Akalis in October 1920. Though the S.G.P.C. and the Committee appointed by it virtually controlled the affairs of the Golden Temple, the fact that the keys of the *Toshakhana* were still in the possession of a Government-appointed Manager gave the reformers the feeling of continued Government control over the gurdwaras. At its meeting held on 29 October 1921, the Executive Committee of the S.G.P.C. asked Sardar Sunder Singh Ramgarhia to hand over the keys to Sardar Kharak Singh, the president of the S.G.P.C. But the British appointed manager did not accept the demand of the S.G.P.C. Therefore, the confrontation was ensued between the Committee and the British authority. There were many meeting held for compromise but no result was found. However, at the end the British authority accept the demand of assign the keys to the Committee. On 17 January, 1922, a gazette officer of the

Punjab Government was sent to deliver the keys to Baba Kharak Singh, president of the S.G.P.C.¹⁵ On the victory of this, Mahatma Gandhi sent the following telegram to Baba Kharak Singh: “First Battle for India’s Freedom Won. Congratulation.”¹⁶

Guru-ka-Bagh Morcha

There was a serious conflict took place between the Akalis and the British Government at the Gurdwara Guru ka Bagh at Amritsar. The Gurdwara 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 Parbandhak Committee on 23th August 1921. However, 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. The Akalis held a meeting at Guru ka Bagh where police dispersed them and arrested leaders, including Mehtab Singh and Master Tara Singh.¹⁷ The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee took the challenge and decided to launch a *morcha* and *Jathas* of 100 Akalis each was formed, which proceeded towards Guru Ka Bahg. For 19 days, the encounter between the police and passive resisters continued. The massive number of 5605 Akalis had been arrested and thousands were injured. The 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 to access 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 by the Akali reformers against the British Government.

Jaito Morcha

The British Government deposed Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha because Maharaja of Nabha had sympathies with the nationalists and Akali movement.¹⁸ The S.G.P.C. pledged full support to the Maharaja. From July 1923 onwards, an Akhand Path of Guru Granth Sahib was begun at Jaito in Nabha State for the reinstatement of the deposed Maharaja Ripudaman Singh. On 1st September, it was decided that the Jathas comprising 25 Akalis would consider to this issue. The police tried to stop the Akand Path through repressive methods. The State police arrested these Akalis. The

¹⁵ Komma, *The Sikh Situation in the Punjab*, Fortnightly Review, September 1923, p. 32.

¹⁶ Ganda Singh (ed.), *Some Confidential Papers of Akali Movement*, Amritsar: Sikh Ithias Research Board, SGPC, 1965, p. 11.

¹⁷ Surinder Singh Johar, *Holy Sikh Shrines*, New Delhi: M.D. Publications, 1998, p. 64.

¹⁸ Khushwant Singh, *History of the Sikhs (1839-2004)*, vol.2, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 209.

S.G.P.C decided to send daily Jathas to Jaito from the Akal Takht at Amritsar. The protestors were arrested, beat on and kick dragged them into the Jaito Fort. 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. The Indian National Congress declared its full support to the Akali movement. Pt. Jawaharlal 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 the Nabha Jail. Finally, Government of Punjab relented and agreed to transfer the control of the Gurdwara to the Akalis.

Section-II

In the early 20th century a general assembly representing to all the Sikhs called 'Sarbat Khalsa' met in front of Akal Takht on 15th November 1920 to make arrangement for the management of Harmandir Sahib and other gurdwaras. All the delegates were Amritdhari Sikhs and regular contributors of *Daswandh*.¹⁹ This assembly resolved to constitute a committee of 175 members to control all the gurdwaras inside as well as outside the Punjab. All the members of the provisional committee formed by the Government were diplomatically included into it. This committee was named as 'Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee.' The committee held its first meeting at Akal Takht on December 12, 1920. The Panj Piaras conducted the scrutiny of all the members. The S.G.P.C appointed a sub-committee to draft its constitution immediately after its formation. The new constitution thus, prepared was adopted by the S.G.P.C. After adopting this constitution, the S.G.P.C got itself registered as a corporate body on April 30, 1921 under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. The task before the S.G.P.C was to bring the gurdwaras under the Panthic control and management by removing the corrupt Mahants. Thus, the S.G.P.C emerged as a pioneer in the struggle of gurdwara reform. It was at the times of its inception purely a religious body aiming at the religious, cultural and moral upliftment of the Sikhs. On 14th December, 1920 a political organization of the Sikhs, Shiromani Akali Dal was constituted which also made a considerable contribution in the struggle for reform of Sikh shrines. It took upon itself to execute the decisions of the S.G.P.C by occupying the particular gurdwaras through its *Jathas* under the directions of later. Several Akali Jathas were sent to different historical gurdwaras as we discussed in the first section. The British had to legislate the Sikh Gurdwara Act, which was duly signed by the Governor General on 28 July 1925.²⁰

According to this Act, the management of the Golden Temple was handed over to the S.G.P.C permanently replacing from the clutches of the hereditary *pujaris*, *mahants* and *sarbrahs*. Later on, some other historical gurdwaras also came under this body. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee was formed with duly elected members and proven a boon for the rapid development of the Golden Temple and

¹⁹ S.C Mittal, *Freedom Movement in Punjab*, Delhi: Concept Publisher Company, 1977, p. 152.

²⁰ Madanjit Kaur, *The Golden Temple- Past and Present*, Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1983, p. 82.

other historical gurdwaras in Punjab. This committee worked in a planned manner. Everything had to be executed according to stipulated rules and regulations. A proper office of this committee was established and some appointments were made on a regular basis, according to the nature of the work. With the implementation of the Sikh Gurdwara Act of 1925, a tremendous improvement came in the management of the Darbar Sahib at Amritsar and other gurdwaras as well. The management of the gurdwaras came under a constitution. The aims and duties of the Act were to supervise the internal and external management of the shrines through managing body, to check the daily routine of the shrines, to fix the size and composition of the managing body, qualification of the members, election procedure, power structure and decision-making and activities of the management committee of the local shrines

Conclusion

To conclude it can be say that the gurdwara reform movement brought about a change in the character of Sikh Gurdwaras, which became powerful centers of dissent from loyalist institutions. The most important achievement of this movement, which was one of the largest, longest, strongest and most popular mass protests against the colonial rule in India, was to secure for the Sikhs supreme control over about 250 gurdwaras with an income of Rs. 20 lakhs in those days.²¹ It brought an end to the misuse and abuse of the huge gurdwaras funds by the hereditary custodians. The gurdwara reform movement became very powerful and the British authorities came to an agreement with Akalis reformers according to their demands. Thus, the gurdwara reform movement ended in success.

²¹ Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making*, New Delhi: Archives Publishers, 1987, p.79.