

Gurdwara Reform Movement: Genesis and Growth

Abstract

Gurdwara Reform Movement did not appear in isolation suddenly or dramatically. It has its background in Singh Sabha Movement and Namdhari Movement. It was also a time when British immediately after the Punjab annexation (1849) established their complete control over Golden Temple by beaucroatic means. Further, during first decade of 20th century the modern Sikh cultural awareness stood radicalised because of Sikh leaders concerned with independent Sikh identity leading to asserssion of their control over their religious places of worship particularly Golden Temple and Akal Takht. For this purpose, Gurdwara Parbandak Committee was formed. It sends Sikh Jathas to free their religious places from the clutches of Mahants in non-violent manner like Golden Temple Treasury keys, occupation of Panja Sahib, Tarn Taran Sahib etc. During II phase effective methods were adopted by making counter propaganda, intensifying campaign to increase pressure on government of the Province. Guru-ka-Bagh Morcha, Nankana Sahib etc. witnessed it. We can referred to the radicalization of Sikh thought because of international impact upon British Punjab especially the participation of some Sikhs through the Ghadar movement and Babbar activities in the anti-British freedom Movement in addition to the impact of soviet revolution 1917. Of the various results of the movement, one was the growth of anti-British journalism in Punjabi language but under the control of Sikhs influenced by the Singh Sabha Ideology. Secondly, the Akali morchas got involved a number of new regions/cities like Jaito, surrounded by Faridkot and Nabha in the anti-imperial freedom movement of India. Thirdly, even the nationalist movement of India came under the impact of revolutionary and leftist ideologies of socialism.

Keywords: Gurdwara, Sikh, Dal Khalsa, Masand, Mahant, Jagir, Langar, Renaissance.

Introduction

The early twentieth century witnessed an important landmark of Sikh history with Gurdwara Reform Movement. This movement was the impact of the events which have taken place in past two centuries i.e. 18th and 19th centuries in Punjab. Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak which was nurtured by his successors. The tenth Guru Gobind Singh formed a Sikh martial institution against the tyranny of the Mughals and Afghans. After him, the holy book 'Granth Sahib' was to be followed as Guru. In the leadership of Banda Singh Bahadur, later under Dal Khalsa, the Sikhs continued to defend themselves and their land from Mughals, Marathas and Afghans. Maharaja Ranjit Singh formed the Sikh Kingdom. It was annexed by the Britishers. By this time the Sikh worship places - the gurdwaras were managed the people who were related to the families of the 'Gurus' or masands. The Mahants who were serving the various gurdwaras had also become hereditary. Many lands and jagirs were attached to most of the gurdwaras for carrying on daily langar and other purposes. Now Punjab was acted upon by two powers - (a) political i.e. the Britishers and (b) socio-economical i.e. religious institutions. Both these sides acted simultaneously and the events which took place form the causation of Gurdwara Reform Movement.

Review of Literature

M.L. Ahluwalia, 'Gurdwara Reform Movement 1919-1925', An Era of Congress-Akali Collaboration, New Delhi, 1985.

It's a voluminous work for which official records, reports, correspondence and speeches have been taken into consideration. It provides a reader full as well as comprehensive view of Gurdwara Reform Movement from the factors responsible for its origin to the sustenance of it. This movement was aimed at reforms in Sikh gurdwara management and

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also to gain control over them vis-a-vis to boost national aspirations of Sikhs at time when Indian National Congress had launched nationwide challenge against British Empire.

Dr. Nazer Singh, 'Modern Sikh Studies and Historiography (1846-1947)', New Delhi, 2012

In this book, the author has focused his ideas on Sikh identity. The basis of his work is historiography where most of the modern historians writings have been considered. Beginning from birth of Sikhism with Guru Nanak to military-political success of Singhs which gave new dimension to Sikh organization and ideology. From British Punjab to Sikh reform movements within its fold i.e. Khalsa to Gurdwara Reform movement. There reform movements aimed the Sikhs at preservation of instinct of self.

Navtej Singh, 'Punjab under the Colonial Situations - Economy, Society and Politics', Mohali, 2018

It is worth-mentioning that author is pioneer to introduce the term 'colonialism' in study of Punjab History. His area of research is political, economic and social transformation of Punjab under British colonialism. Through this work the author has explored the new areas of research and had made an attempt to reinterpret the existing analyses. Under British, the economy of Punjab faced famine, starvation, indebtedness etc. He had also discussed the plight of women. It was the political events which took place led to rise of various movements resulting in partition of Punjab. Amidst these political events, the Sikh masses were inspired for change and sustain their country's freedom. Last, but not least, the challenges before Sikhs after partition.

Aim of the Study

1. Apart from religious dimension, increasing role and popularity of these religious institutions.
2. The social-cultural transition during this period.

Punjab became the part of colonial empire on 29th March, 1849, during the governor generalship of Lord Dalhousie. The desire of the Britishers and circumstances favoured them to interfere in the administration of gurdwaras especially Golden Temple, Amritsar.¹ The first Sikh reform movement was Nirankari movement founded by Guru Dyal Das which originated in 1843-1844. It was followed by Namdhari movement founded by Baba Ram Singh in 1857. These reformers were against the malpractices of the mahants in the gurdwaras. As both the movements originated from within among the Sikhs yet they emerged somewhat distinct than the Sikhs / Punjab during its historical evolution.² The origin of Singh Sabha Movement in 1873 at Amritsar also known as 'Sikh Renaissance' was to bring awareness as well as identification as base for future developments. It was through medium of education that literate middle class gave impetus Sikhs towards self conscious community³ to safeguard their interest. Journals and newspaper like Khalsa Akhbar (1886) Lahore, Punjab Durpan (1885), Singh Sabha Gazette Amritsar (1890) to name the few played important role in spreading realization. Chief Khalsa Diwan came into being in 1902. But initially both movements had

passivity towards the British domination.⁴ Fenech in his work has stressed the role of Singh Sabha and the Chief Khalsa Diwan in the making of martyrdom centric interpretation of Sikh past and faith.⁵ The Land Alienation Act of 1901 and Colonization Bill of 1907 caused unrest among the peasantry of Punjab against Britisher imperialist pressures. The Ghadar Revolt of 1913-1916, was for the mobilization of the masses against British hegemony.⁶ However, the Rowlatt Agitation and later Non-cooperation Movement started by Indian National Congress were in full swing in Punjab. During this time, the movement of Sikh gurdwara also started. It was post first world war that Indian National Congress was led by new leadership of Gandhi and Nehru. The party was fully prepared to meet the new challenges both from inside and outside. It also wanted to launch nationwide struggle for freedom. The Congress party wanted to be secular so it provided support to two contemporary movements - one, Khilafat movement of Ali brothers and other Gurdwara Reform Movement launched by Akali Dal and Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee.⁷

The birth of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, the present Sikh religious body that governs the administration of the Sikh gurdwaras came into being in the second week of November, 1920. It was due to the resolution passed by Central Sikh League in 1919 that the gurdwaras should be under control of the Panth. It had 179 members later reduced to 175. The main feature of selection of this committee was to allocate definite number of members to each district and native state. It was further stated that a committee of 72 members would be appointed for the management of Golden Temple out of which half of members would be originally selected by Government in consultation with Maharaja of Patiala.

This committee of 175 members also had 36 members of provisional committee formed by the government. On December 12, 1920, meeting was called where Sunder Singh Majithia was elected President, Harbans Singh Attari Vice-President and Sunder Singh Ramgarhia as Secretary. On 20 December, 1920, Shiromani Akali Dal, another organization was formed which was to gather masses for taking part in Sikh gurdwara reform movement. During Non-cooperation Gandhiji wanted Sikhs to follow passive resistance. In the state of indecision, present committee was to expire and it was left for new committee to be elected. New committee was formed in August 1921, where Sardar Kharak Singh was elected President, Sardar Bahadur Mahtuab Singh as Secretary and Sardar Sunder Singh Ramgarhia as Vice-President. There were 35 members in executive committee. The main objectives were:-

1. To obtain control over all gurdwaras and religious institutions
2. To provide management in gurdwaras on principles acceptable to all Sikhs
3. Abolition of hereditary succession to office of incumbents.

The further programme was chalked and the resolution was passed with large majority confirming the principles of non-cooperation and resistance. An Akali deputation was to tour the province encouraging Sikhs to join Shiromani Akali Dal and to free their gurdwaras with the help of new formed Sikh sahidi jathas.

The growth of this movement can be seen through various stages. First it started with Golden Temple Treasury Keys - Arur Singh, the manager of Harimandir, had honoured General Dyer at Akal Takht. This act of his hurt the Sikh religious feeling and masses wanted him to be disposed off. In November, 1920, Akalis had taken charge of Harimandir and Sardar Sunder Singh Ramgarhia (Vice-President of Parbandhak Committee) was made incharge. The keys of treasury were with him. On 29 October 1921, executive committee passed a resolution, according to which Sardar Sunder Singh Ramgarhia (manager of Harimandir) was to handover keys of treasury of the Temple to Sardar Kharak Singh (President of Parbandhak Committee). Sardar Sunder Singh consulted Deputy Commissioner. The Punjab Government on being informed, instructed Deputy Commissioner to call Sunder Singh to surrender the keys and valuables of Temple with him. This act led to severe public criticism. Various Sikh jathas were sent with non-violent protests. Prominent members of Prabandhak Committee were arrested. However, it was in January 1922, at Akal Takht the keys were handed-over to Sardar Kharak Singh. Mahatma Gandhi congratulated to Baba Kharak Singh by saying the first decisive battle was won.

Occupation of Panja Sahib, Tarntaran Sahib, Khadur Sahib Gurdwaras

In November-December 1920, the Akali jathas went to various gurdwaras and took possession of them from the mahants. Babe-de-Ber shrine in Sialkot on November 21, 1920; a party of Akali Sikhs occupied the Panja Sahib shrine at Hassan Abdal on December 28; Sacha Sauda gurdwara in Sheikhpura district where mahant was expelled by the Sikh jathas⁸ and control was established. The Gurdwara at village Chola in Amritsar district was also taken under control in January 1921. On 26th January, 1921 at Tarntaran, a serious collusion occurred between the Akali jatha and the mahant. Latter attacked the Akali jatha in which two Sikhs were killed and many received injuries. But the possession came into the hand of Akalis. The non-cooperator Dr. Kitchloo and Girdhari Lal induced the both parties not to give any evidence, so that it would be impossible hitherto to prosecute anyone.⁹

It was on 11th and 12th February 1921, a large jatha of Sikhs had gone to Gurdwara Khadur Sahib in Amritsar district. They expelled the Mahant from the gurdwara and took possession of it together with some shops and also the lands adjoining it. The jatha is alleged to have demolished an idol in the gurdwara worshipped by Hindus.¹⁰

Second Phase

During this time, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and Akali Party had decided to oppose government measures by making counter

propaganda, intensifying campaign and increase pressure on government through Central Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council of the Province.¹¹

Guru Ka Bagh Morcha

Guru-ka-Bagh shrine is situated in Ajnala tehsil of Amritsar district. It is 10 or 12 miles from Amritsar city. Akalis has taken possession of the shrine forcibly but agricultural land, orchard etc. attached to the shrine still were under the mahant. Mahant Sunder Das complained to police about the theft of wood from his land. As in beginning of August 1922, five Akalis¹² living in Gurdwara under instructions of Parbandhak Committee cut down a tree to use wood for public kitchen (langar) of the shrine. The Akalis were arrested and convicted of theft. They were imprisoned for six months and fined also. Again on occasion of monthly Amawas fair, Akalis cut trees on Mahant's land. A fresh complaint was made. A detachment of police was sent to Guru-ka-Bagh shrine in order to protect person and property of the Mahant. By end of August, many leading members of Prabandhak Committee, volunteers had been arrested. Then jathas varying from 200 to 500 in number were despatched daily. The agitation continued by non-violence means and the number of Akalis arrested had risen to five thousand.

Nankana Sahib Tragedy

This shrine is related to the birth place of Guru Nanak. Its affairs were administered by Mahant Narain Das. The Prabandhak Committee had openly proclaimed its intentions and it had seriously alarmed the Mahant. The reforming party demanded his resignation. On February 20, 1921 Bhai Lachhman Singh led a jatha to put an end to the scandalous affairs, prevailing under Mahant Narain Das. But the armed people hired by the Mahant fell upon the peaceful jatha and killed about 200 Sikhs. The bodies of the dead Sikhs were collected were set on fire with kerosene oil. The immediate effect of the massacre at Nankana Sahib to accentuate the prejudices of reforming party against the mahants of gurdwara with the result that numerous Sikhs and shrines were seized in rapid succession.¹³ Mahatma Gandhi visited Nankana Sahib Gurdwara alongwith Maulana Shaukat Ali on 3rd March, 1921 and addressed the grievances of the Sikhs. He shared that everything he saw and heard points to a second edition of Dyerism more barbarous, more calculated and more fiendish than the Dyerism at Jallianwala.¹⁴ Later governor of Punjab, Maclagon himself visited Nankana Sahib and promised to punish the incumbent. Then mahant was caught and imprisoned Sardar Harbans Singh Attari headed the committee to which the administration of shrine was handed-over but it was Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee which took its possessions.

Jaito Morcha

Maharaja Ripudaman Singh, the sympathiser of Akalis, working for the reform of gurdwaras. He observed Martyr's day to honour all those who laid down their lives at Nankana Sahib. He secretly helped Akalis during Guru Ka Bagh morcha. When he had clash with Maharaja of Patiala, then Britishers got a

chance against him. Nabha King was dethroned forced to leave his state and sent to Dehradun in July 1923. Administration of Nabha was handed to W. Johnston. Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee adopted agitation as part of its programme for restoration to Maharaja of Nabha. For Maharaja's restoration in Jaito at Gurdwara Gangsar Akhand Path was started. Many jathas were sent to attend Akhand path. Government took strict action against Sikh reform jathas. They were lathi charged and imprisoned. Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru who also came to Jaito was arrested and imprisoned. The jathas from Zira and Moga Tehsils of Ferozepur district, Jagraon tehsil of Ludhiana and Amritsar etc. were drawn to Jaito. Religious organizations like Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee and Akali Dal were declared unlawful assemblies by British authorities. On February 10, 1924, Shahid jatha of 500 Akalis was sent. They received the bullets bravely and many were injured. The Congress Party supported the Gurdwara reform movement. Akali Sahayak Bureau was formed with headquarter at Amritsar by Congress which also helped them with funds countering government propaganda and also legal aid to those facing prosecution cases.¹⁵ Thus this morcha continued till July 1925.

Bhai Pheru Morcha

While the Jaitomorcha was still going on, another clash took place at Bhai Pheru in Lahore district. The land of 500 acre was aligned with shrine and a jagir of Rs. 5000/-. Mahant and some of udasis were administering the shrine. By end of 1922, SGPG has taken it under its control. A deed was made with Mahant with monthly income. But by 1924, the Mahant occupied the land attached to the shrine. On the order of the government many Akalis were arrested. The police imprisoned the jathas and number rose above 6000. The situation continued and was sought later when the dispute ended and the ownership rights of Gurdwara Guru Sangat Sahib Waqia Bhai Pheru was given to Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee.¹⁶

Thus, the efforts of the Akalis through Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee continued in Majha and Malwa to restore administration of gurdwara under them. The Doaba region witnessed the more radical section of Akalis, who did not approve of method of non-violence for struggle to achieve their goal. These radical forms a separate organisation called Babbar Akalis to meet the challenges of the British government. They were more active in Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar. Though they couldn't hold longer yet their objective to communicate the message of revolt was carried well. It led to emergence of revolutionary struggle for freedom in Punjab. The efforts of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee latter led the like Kirti Kisan Party, Jawan Bharat Sabha, Hindustan Socialist Republican Association etc. passage for Gurdwara Reform Act of 1925.

Conclusion

To sum up with Gurdwara Reform Movement did not appear in isolation suddenly or dramatically. It has its background in Singh Sabha movement and Namdhari movement. It was also a time when British immediately after the Punjab annexation (1849) established their complete control over Golden Temple by beurocratic means. Further, during first decade of 20th century the modern Sikh cultural awareness stood radicalized because of Sikh leaders concerned with independent Sikh identity leading to assession of their control over their religious places of worship particularly Golden Temple and Akal Takht. We can referred to the radicalization of Sikh thought because of international impact upon British Punjab especially the participation of some Sikhs through the Gadar movement and Babar activities in the anti-British freedom movement in addition to the impact of Soviet revolution 1917. Of the various results of the movement, one was the growth of anti-British journalism in Punjabi language but under the control of Sikhs influenced by the Singh Sabha Ideology. Second, the Akali morchas got involved a number of new regions / cities like Jaito surrounded by Faridkot and Nabha in the anti-imperial freedom movement of India. Thirdly, even the nationalist movement of India came under the impact of revolutionary and leftist ideologies of socialism.

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