

# Punjab and the Non Co-Operation Movement

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## Abstract

The mass movement launched under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, in 1920 generated nationalism among the masses, which shook the mighty British Empire. The very special character of this movement was that it had not only took up the particular way of struggle and the particular grievances of the people but touched every aspect and deal with every problem of the society whether social, economic, religious or political. It played a vital role in bringing each class and community on a single platform against the unjust British rule. The local movements, which were sprouting in different regions of the country because of their own local problems irrespective of their religious, social, economical tendencies, gained momentum and were deeply inspired by the movement launched under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.

**Keywords:** Swaraj, Akali, Jathas, Mohants, Gurudwara, Shrimoni Akali Dal, Khalsa

## Introduction

The First World War gave a new character to the Punjab politics. The Congress was of the opinion that the victory of the allies would result in the betterment of the Indians. Even the Punjab Congress was of the same opinion. Fazal-i-Hussain argued that-"it was a struggle between freedom and slavery." On the other side Lala Lajpat Rai popularly known as 'Lion of Punjab' totally opposed this attitude.<sup>1</sup>

The British Government was highly alarmed with the growing campaign of Mr.Gandhi and the Ali Brothers who were making headway, especially in the region of Punjab where they gained the dangerous sympathy of the Sikhs.<sup>2</sup> This was the period when Punjab was developing the Akali Movement, which was however entirely a religious movement but formed an important part of Indian Freedom struggle.<sup>3</sup> The Akalis made great contribution in the Indian struggle against the British Government and the non- cooperation movement was largely supported by them.<sup>4</sup>

Akali movement played a vital role in the political development of the Punjab and aroused the peasants of Punjab. According to Mohender Singh: "It was during the Akali Movement that the pro British feudal leadership of the Sikhs was replaced by educated middle class nationalists and the rural and the urban classes united on a common platform during the two pronged Akali struggle." The unique feature of the movement was that the movement was completely based on the religious issues but purely based on non-communal lines.<sup>4</sup>

Akali Movement was considered to be more dangerous by the British Government as compared to the Civil Disobedience Movement of Mr. Gandhi. The Assistant Director of C.I.D, D.Petrie signed a memorandum in 1921 in which he states-"Gandhi's propaganda makes its appeal mainly to the urban classes, which lack both the stamina and physical courage to oppose successfully even small bodies of police, the Akali campaign is essentially a rural movement, and its followers are men of fine physique with a national history of which the martial characteristics have been purposely kept alive both by the Government and the Sikh themselves."<sup>5</sup>

Drastic impact of the decision taken by the Sikh League can be witnessed on the students and Professors of the Khalsa College, Amritsar. Gandhiji's visit to Amritsar resulted in the resignation of many Professors. Gandhiji during his stay in Lahore twice addressed the students to boycott all connections with the British Government in matter of university affiliations and Government grants. All these had a great impact on the

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Lahore Islamia School and Muslim High school. The Punjab Provincial Muslim League also passed a resolution in favour of the non-cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

At the annual session the Sikh League adopted the policy of non cooperation in its entirety. According to the reports of Commissioner of the Jullundur Division- "the Jats are everywhere becoming involved and are taking non payment of revenue." In many places the Private Arbitration courts are also reported to have been formed.<sup>7</sup>

Non-Cooperation Committee was set up in Punjab with Lalajpat Rai as its President, and Chaudhary Rambhaji Singh as its Vice-President, Bhai Sardul Singh and Dr. Kitchlew as its Secretary and Lala Dundi Chand as Treasurer. Mahatma Gandhi deputed Dr. Kitchlew to arrange and organize Non Cooperation programme in Punjab. There was a great enthusiasm throughout the province. Dr. Kitchlew and Aga Safdar made propaganda work during their visit in several places. In Lahore, people offered their gold jewellery and even their properties for the sake of the national work. Several Volunteer Corps had been established under the leadership of Aga Safdar which was joined by many young nationalist. Many local committees were established in the district areas.<sup>8</sup>

Secretaries of the Non Cooperation movement Dr. Sifauddin Kitchlew and Sardul Singh Caveeshar sent a letter to the Khilafat Committee, Moslem League, Sikh League, District Congress Committees, the Home Rule Leagues and the Indian Association as follows:- "..... the work before us is the attainment of swaraj by non violent non cooperation with Government, and thus get wrongs done to India is the matter of the Khilafat and the Punjab atrocities righted. For this purpose we would request you soon to form representative Committee of Non cooperators in your district..... We may inform you that the first work before the Committee is the boycott of Councils. For this purpose Protest Forms have been printed for securing signatures from the voters..... we shall be glad to send you as many Protest Forms in Urdu, Hindi or Gurmukhi as you may desire. Kindly note that it is not sufficient that the propaganda work be carried on only in your town; for the success of the movement it is absolutely necessary that the movement be carried into the furthest corners of your district. ....The next thing of immediate importance is the collection of Funds. A large amount is required for the propaganda work. Donations here and there would not do; what is required is house and house collections. Kindly form a strong deputation for the purposed and begin the work at once....."<sup>9</sup>

Regarding the Punjab's response regarding the programme of khadi, Gandhi said-"No part of India can beat the Punjab for spinning wheels." On 8<sup>th</sup> March 1921, at Ambala, Gandhi said, Punjab was most progressive in the matter of Swadeshi and the spinning wheel gained more popularity in Punjab as compared to the other provinces. As far as the Tilak Swaraj Fund was considered, the efforts of Punjab was heading the list.<sup>10</sup> At Gujranwala, people were switch over to khaddar turbans in place of foreign cloth turbans.<sup>11</sup> On 18<sup>th</sup> November 1920, Sri Krishna

High School, Haryana transformed itself into a national school. The opening ceremony was done by Mr.Gandhi and the work was taken up very enthusiastically.<sup>12</sup>

A meeting of Khalsa college council and the Managing Committee was held on 4<sup>th</sup> December to consider sub-committee's report, signed by the Chairman of the sub-committee, the Hon'ble Sardar Bahudur Sunder Singh Majithia, C.I.E, and countersigned by the Hon'ble Captain Gopal Singh O. B,E; Honorary Secretary of the Khalsa college, to consider all those rules the Managing Committee decided to delete, to remove all Government control from the management of the institution, and thus after a 3 long hour session it was accepted in its entirety.<sup>13</sup>

A meeting was held at Islamia college building by Shaukat Ali and co. Mohammed Ali was the first to deliver the speech in which he laid emphasis on 'the hostile attitude of the British Government towards the Turkey in the Peace Conference and held the whole blame on our Government for the results.' He was followed by Abul Kalam Azad who appealed to the Mohammedans to refuse the grants and disaffiliation of the Islamia College.<sup>14</sup>

Gurudwaras had a special place among the Sikh community not only because it is a place of worship but also served as the centers of political and social activities. The Singh Sabha was the very first to criticize the corruption prevailing within the premises of the shrines.<sup>15</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in British India the Sikh Gurudwaras were controlled by the Udasi Mahants who were appointed by the Governors.<sup>16</sup> In 1920 the movement was started by Singh Sabha's political wing which later on came to be known as Akali Dal. The volunteer group known as jathas under the leadership of Kartar Singh Jabbar played a vital role in the movement. Bade Di Ber Gurudwara in Sialkot was the first shrine chosen for the reform. The widow of Mahant Harman Singh was in-charge of the Gurudwara. As it was the only source of income to her she resisted it in the beginning but as she was offered a pension she surrendered.<sup>17</sup>

Gurudwaras were under the control of the corrupt mahants, the movement aimed at freeing these Gurudwaras from the clutches of these corrupt mahants. Maharaja Ranjit Singh endowed the revenue free lands to these Gurudwaras, during 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. They were(the mahants) getting full support from the Government. Its aim was to keep the Sikhs out of the rising tide of nationalism and to be loyal to the British government. On the other hand, reformations of the gurudwara were the target of the Sikh reformers. The two incidents horrified nationalist-(A) issuing of Hukumnama by the priest of the Golden Temple at Amritsar against the Ghadarites and (B) then honoured General Dyer.<sup>18</sup>

In November 1920, Shromoni Gurudara Prabhandak Committee was elected to sort out the religious issue, which was concentrated during 1920's political turmoil.<sup>19</sup> Mahatma Gandhi's and Ali Brother's visit to Amritsar in October 1920 provoke the excitement of the locality and resulted the merger with the non-cooperation movement.<sup>20</sup> A Central

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Committee came to be known as the Shriromani Akali Dal was formed in December, which was the chief organizer of the Akali Jathas to organize struggle in the more systematic manner. It was mainly comprised of the Jat peasantry under the leadership of the nationalist leaders. Akalis adopted the non-cooperation movement formally on 11<sup>th</sup> May, with two aims and objectives-(i) to reform the gurudwaras and (ii) and to launch non-cooperation movement against the British Government.<sup>22</sup>

The Government was more bewildered with the blending of the two movements. This confusion renewed the agitation against the Government over the 'keys affair'. Even under the SGPC's management the keys of the treasury of the Golden temple were held by the managers appointed by the Government. The SGPC passed the resolution on 28<sup>th</sup> October 1921, asking to hand over the keys to its president, but the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar sent an official to under the police custody to collect the keys from the manager.<sup>23</sup>

The nature of the agitation was completely transformed after the Nankana massacre in February 1920, which resulted in about killing of 130 people. It was under the control of Mahant Sadhu Ram, who belongs to the Udasi sect of the Sikhs and emerged as the wealthy feudal landlords. Under their rule poor peasantry were deprived of their rights.<sup>24</sup>

Sikh shrines were hastily held in custody.<sup>25</sup> Mahant Narain Das succeeded Mahant Sadhu Ram, who followed the footsteps of his predecessor who had the support of the British authorities. The Sikh reformers were highly alarmed with the Nankana Sahib affairs. In October 1920, a resolution was held at Dharowal in which Mahant Narain Das was warned to sanitize the administration of the temple from the disease of corruption. On the other hand, Mahant Narain Das recruited a strong force to crush the Akali Movement. Apart from that, Narain Das, at Nankana, arranged a meeting, with the approval of Mr. C.M King, the Commissioner of Lahore and in consultation with Baba Kartar Singh Badi and other Mahants. The Committee was of the opinion that not to acknowledge the authority of Shriromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee and formed a parallel committee with Mahant Narain and Mahant Basant Das as its President and Secretary respectively. 'Sant Sevak', a newspaper was started from Lahore with the aim of propagating against the Akali Movement.<sup>26</sup>

Mahant Narain Das collected 400 mercenaries and provided them with arms and ammunitions. In the meanwhile, Shriromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee was chalking out a plan to get hold of the Golden Temple and the Akal Takhat under their control. A resolution was passed on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1921, in order to compel the Mahant for reforms.<sup>27</sup>

The Mahant was frightened with the SGPC's decision and of the rumors of the forcible occupation of the Gurudwara by Kartar Singh Jhabbar. He was agreed upon to a compromise and arranged the meeting with Kartar Singh Jhabbar. But soon his mind changed and he started preparations for the murder of the Akali leaders.<sup>28</sup>

Taking into an account of the entire situation SGPC instructed the Akali Dal leaders not to proceed to the Janam Asthan. Bhai Lachman Singh agreed but the other members convinced him only to pay homage and to return back peacefully. On 20<sup>th</sup> February 1921, under the leadership of Lachman Singh Dharvolia about 130 Sikhs entered the courtyard of the shrine. The exit points were closed and they were massacred brutally.<sup>29</sup> After killing all the members of the jathas they burnt the bodies.<sup>30</sup>

Soon the news spread like wild fire and the Mahant Narain Singh and two of his henchmen and 26 pathans were arrested and sent to Lahore.<sup>31</sup>

The native Press made a unanimous attack on the Mahant and expresses their deep sorrow and sympathised with the families of the martyrs.<sup>33</sup> National leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Shaukat Ali, Lala Dundi Chand, Lala Lajpat Rai, Dr. Kitchlew all expressed their sympathy with the Akalis.

The Sikh leaders passed a resolution on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1921, for launching passive resistance movement and the SGPC insisted the British Government to release the protestors and to legalize the control of the Gurudwaras. During the Punjab Provincial Congress at Rawalpindi, a Sikh-Hindu Conference was organized. The Hindus joined the Sikhs in their struggle on request of the Jagat Guru Shankaracharya. On 11<sup>th</sup> May large number of Akalis jathas proceeded to take control over the Gurudwaras.<sup>34</sup>

There was a constant effort made by the Government to keep the keys of the Toshakhana of the Golden Temple under their custody. Immediately Akali's organized protest meetings and ten of the Akali jathas reached Amritsar and won victory in the 'Keys Affair' in October 1921. The Sikhs joined hartals to protest the visit of Prince of Wales on the advice of the SGPC. The Government in retaliation arrested Baba Kharak Singh and Master 32ra Singh, the militant leaders of the SGPC, resulting in the expansion of the movement to the remotest areas of the country. This was the period when the non-cooperation was on its peak. The Government decided not to interfere in the religious affair of the Sikhs and surrendered the keys of the Toshakhana to Baba Kharak Singh.<sup>35</sup> In a telegram sent by Mahatma Gandhi to Baba stated: 'First battle for India's freedom won. Congratulations.'<sup>36</sup>

A non-violent struggle culminated at Guru-ka-Bagh Gurudwara, to liberate the Gurudwara. The Government got the opportunity to teach the lesson to the Akalis. The event took place at Gokewale a small village about 20 km away from Amritsar. The Gurudwara was handed over to SGPC by the mahant in August 1921 but he claimed personal possession of the land attached to the Gurudwara. One day a dry kikkar tree was cut down by an Akali, the mahant soon complained to the police of the theft. The official grabbed the opportunity and arrested five Akalis and put on trial. In reaction to his Akali Jathas began to cut trees from the disputed land. The Government held charges of theft against them and started arresting all of them.<sup>37</sup>

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The mahants seized the opportunity and lodged a case of theft against the Akalis.<sup>38</sup> The Akalis reacted to this and send jathas of five men daily to cut wood from premises and made arrest in non violent non cooperation movement. Public sympathy was much aroused by the use of force against the non violent struggle.<sup>39</sup>

Now the authorities, instead of arresting them, began to beat the Akali volunteers mercilessly with their lathis. The Akalis on the other hand faced them with courage and bravery. C.F Andrews describe it as 'inhuman, brutal, foul, cowardly and incredible to an Englishman and a moral defeat of England.' Throughout Punjab, massive protest meetings were organized and on 10<sup>th</sup> September it was attended by Hakim Ajmal Khan, Swami Shardanand and Kumari Lajwanti of Jullunder.<sup>40</sup> A Committee was appointed by the Congress Working Committee to investigate the matter. Once again the Government failed and had to allow the Akalis to cut the trees.<sup>41</sup>

**Aim of The Study**

The Akali Movement was gaining momentum along with the National Movement in the region of Punjab. To know about the facts that how these movements however had very different in colours but mingled with each other so much so that it was really hard to differentiate between the two movements.

**Conclusion**

However the Non-Cooperation Movement failed to achieve its immediate goal of establishing Swaraj in India, but it had a great impact on its people and also on the movements which sprang up in the local areas. In Punjab, the movement was purely a religious movement but it gained momentum along with the national movement. It was completely mingled in the colours of national struggle. It was really difficult to distinguish between the Akali Movement and the Non-cooperation Movement. This was the not only the strength of the movement but was a great success of the movement.

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