

# Role of Akali Dal in Gurdwara Movement

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**Abstract** - The Akali Movement also gave birth to the Shromani Akali Dal and the religion-based politics of the Akalis. The Shromani Akali Dal founded in December 1920 AD to manage the necessary resources in terms of men and money to run the Akali struggle, acquired a unique position of power and prestige in the religious and political life of the Sikhs. Because of the Akalis sacrifices in and contribution to the success of the Akali Movement, the Akali Dal gained tremendous influence with the Sikh masses, particularly in the rural areas.

The evolution of the Institution of *Gurdwara* Sikh shrines, popularly called Gurdwaras or Dharamsals, ' have played a vital role in shaping the course of events of the five hundred- year old history of the Sikhs and in the development of the Sikh religious tradition. An important part of the Sikh triad- the Guru, the Granth and the Gurdwara- the latter has been traditionally the centre of the religious, social, cultural and political life of the Sikhs. Established by Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, as centres of religious activity and social and moral instruction, and for providing food and shelter to the poor and the needy, the history of their origin and development is as old as that of the Sikh faith itself. As the unity of the Godhead and the brotherhood of mankind were the basic tenets of the faith of Guru Nanak, special attention was paid by him to the establishment of the twin institutions of *sangat* and *pangar* to translate his teachings into practice and to do away with the existing distinctions of castes and classes, of high and low, of rich and poor. Guru Nanak left behind a *sangat* wherever he went with the injunction to build a *Dharamsala* for the purpose of meeting in a common forum. These two institutions thus became Nanak's laboratories for both, the demonstration and the practice of his teachings. The Sikh Gurdwaras and Shrines Bill gave the S.G.P. C. supreme control over 200° important and historical Gurdwaras with an income of over 20 lakhs of rupees a year in 1925 (and now nearly 200 millions). This change brought about some improvements in so far as the income from the Gurdwaras could no longer be used for the personal pleasures of their hereditary custodians, but gave birth to some new unhealthy practices. Since the passage of the Bill in 1925 and the subsequent transfer of the control of most of the important Sikh shrines to the elected hands, charges of misuse of the trust funds and platform have often been levelled by rival groups. Introduction of the election system and anxiety of the rival political groups to capture power by all means, seems to be weakening the very cause and purpose of the popular control of the Sikh shrines<sup>1</sup>.

The Akali Movement, though itself a product of the general awakening and growing political consciousness in the country, seems to have greatly strengthened the forces of nationalism in the Punjab by rejecting the Mahants, the landed aristocracy and other pro-British and vested interests in the Sikh community who had been declared the 'natural leaders' of the Sikhs by the official machinery. The movement provided the Sikh community with a new type of middle- class nationalist leadership, consisting of barristers, vakils, school and college teachers and retired military officers<sup>2</sup>.

This new leadership, instead of playing into the hands of the British officials as the previous leadership of the Chief Khalsa Diwan had done, preferred to join the mainstream of nationalism in the country. It was not surprising, therefore, to find a majority of the Akali leaders turning from the original Akali programme of Gurdwara reform and linking it with the movement of non-cooperation launched by Mahatma Gandhi and the larger programme of the country's struggle for freedom. It was mainly due to this new type of leadership that the

<sup>1</sup> *Resolutions of Sikh League*, Amritsar, Resolution No. 14

<sup>2</sup> *Punjab Legislative Council Proceedings*, 13 March 1920

Akalis could secure active sympathy and support of the Indian National Congress and other nationalist forces in the country in their own struggle against British imperialism in the Punjab.

It was mainly due to the Akali-Congress association during the Akali Movement that the two leaderships came closer to each other and that the Sikhs became inextricably involved in Congress activities. Actually the two groups among the Sikhs: (i) the Akali advocates of purely religious reform, and (ii) others who looked upon the Gurdwara reform only as a part of the larger programme of the country's freedom--remained united till 1939, initially under the leadership of Baba Kharak Singh and later that of Master Tara Singh.

In the Akali Movement the Congress found an opportunity to further its own programme of non-cooperation launched by Mahatma Gandhi and to strengthen its position in the Panjab. By winning over the Akali leadership they were able to influence a larger section of the Sikh masses who had till then remained aloof from the Congress programme<sup>3</sup>.

As Maulana Muhammad Ali remarked in the course of his Presidential Address at the Cocanada Session of the Indian National Congress on 31 December 1923: 'A better opportunity for civil disobedience at least on a provincial scale never presented itself since the arrest of the Mahatma.

Apart from passing formal resolutions lending moral support, the Congress leadership also rendered the Akalis solid practical help by sending Congress volunteers to assist in their publicity work. An Akali Sahayik Bureau was set up at Amritsar to coordinate the Akali-Congress activities and to help the Akalis organise their propaganda machinery<sup>4</sup>.

Almost all important national leaders including Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Muhammad Ali and Hakim Ajmal Khan personally visited Nankana, Amritsar, Guru-ka-Bagh and other places of Akali activity to obtain first-hand information about the events and to help the Akalis by giving advice and moral support.

In the special session of the Congress held at Delhi in September 1923, a resolution was passed, supporting the Akali agitation in the Sikh State of Nabha and it was also decided to send the Congress observers there to get first-hand information about the developments there. Jawaharlal Nehru, A.T. Gidwani and K. Santhanam, who were sent there for the purpose, were arrested as soon as they entered the State territory and put behind the bars for having entered the State without the prior permission of the British Administrator of Nabha.

During their stay in the Nabha jail and their subsequent trials, the Congress observers not only gained the first-hand knowledge about the Akali cause and the genuineness of their sufferings but also got a chance to know about the high-handedness of the bureaucracy and the arbitrary nature of the justice in the Sikh State of Nabha then put under the control of the British Administrator<sup>5</sup>. In a long hand-written statement, choked with emotion and highly appreciative of the Akalis, Nehru attacked the British Administrator of Nabha and the judicial machinery in the State for their 'unscrupulous and crooked ways'. Having gained the first-hand impressions about the Akalis Nehru became their great admirer and wished to prove 'worthy of their high tradition and fine courage'. The last paragraph of his original statement drafted in the Nabha jail on 23 November 1923, reads as follows:

*I was in jail when the Guru-ka-Bagh struggle was gallantly fought and won by the Sikhs. I marvelled at the courage and sacrifice of the Akalis and wished that I could be given an opportunity of showing my deep admiration of them by some form of service.*

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<sup>3</sup> Sohan Singh Josh, *Akali Morchian Da Itahas*, Daman Publishers, Ferozpur, 1986, p.43

<sup>4</sup> *Punjab Legislative Council Proceedings*, 13 March 1920

<sup>5</sup> Amrik Singh, *Punjab in India Politics: Issues & Trends*, Oxford Press, New Delhi, 1988, p.53

That opportunity has now been given to me and I earnestly hope that I shall prove worthy of their high tradition and fine courage. Sat Sri Akal<sup>6</sup>.

In return for the help extended to the Akali Movement, the Congress leadership was able to establish a good deal of influence with the Akali leaders and through them the Congress programme was carried to the Sikh masses. It was mainly due to the nationalist influence upon the Akali leadership that the S.G.P.C. was able to adopt non-violent non-cooperation as a weapon with which to fight the powerful bureaucracy in the Panjab and to broaden the scope of their earlier programme of Gurdwara reform. A formal resolution in favour of 'non-cooperation and passive resistance' was passed by the S.G.P.C. on 11 May 1921. Resolutions were also passed at this meeting to boycott liquor and foreign goods and to substitute Panchayats for the courts of law<sup>7</sup>.

With the election of Sardar Kharak Singh, a professed non-cooperator and a die-hard nationalist, as President of the newly elected S.G.P.C. in July 1921, and the formation of a new Executive Committee consisting of extremists and non-cooperators, the movement of non-cooperation in the Panjab was further strengthened.

This new element in the Akali leadership, to whom the cause of religious reform differed little from extreme nationalism, was able to introduce national politics into the movement for Gurdwara reform and thereby broaden the scope of the Akali Movement.

Perusal of the court proceedings against some of the prominent Akali leaders shows that the ideology of non-cooperation had taken deep roots among them.

Most of them did not defend themselves in the courts. During interrogation, they neither admitted nor denied the official charges against them. Whatever they said in the court was not by way of defence but to tell the official machinery that as non-cooperators they had no regard for the British judicial system which they considered arbitrary and biased. The following extract from Baba Kharak Singh's speech in the court serve as an example: "As the Government is a party to this prosecution and the Judge is one of its servants, I, therefore, do not wish to make any statement. My position as President of the Sikh Panth is like that of the Presidents of the United States, France and Germany.

A strong link and reciprocal relationship had thus been established between the two movements. The Akali Movement became a part of the national movement--in effect a branch of the Congress programme of non-cooperation at the provincial level--and in return received active sympathy and support from the Congress leadership in its struggle against the Government.

The Akali Movement also clearly demonstrated the efficacy of the doctrine of non-violent non-cooperation when the Akalis in the Panjab were able by peaceful means to dislodge the Mahants from their hereditary positions in the Sikh shrines, and the Government from its unreasonable stand<sup>8</sup>.

The Akali-te-Pardesi summarized in the following manner the Akali contribution towards the strengthening of the forces of nationalism:

The Akalis have shown to the Indians how a most arrogant, oppressive, cunning and deceitful bureaucracy can be brought to its knees by means of non-violent Satyagraha. By sacrifices at Guru-ka-Bagh, they have destroyed the prestige of the bureaucracy and raised the dignity of India<sup>9</sup>.

The Akali Movement provides one more illustration of the British policy of weakening popular movements by creating dissent among the leadership and among the masses supporting it. When Sir Malcolm Hailey, the Governor of the Panjab, realised that he could not suppress a popular movement like that of the Akalis by the

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<sup>6</sup>Teja Singh, *The Gurdwara Reform Movement and the Sikh Awakening*, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 1984, p.32

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.35

<sup>8</sup> [www.panjabdigilib.org](http://www.panjabdigilib.org)

<sup>9</sup>Teja Singh and Ganda Singh, *Short History of the Sikhs*, Himmat Press, Jalandhar, 1969, p.51

earlier policy of repression and when each successive measure taken to suppress the Akalis had further added to the popularity and success of the movement, he tried to defeat the Akalis by splitting the ranks of their leadership, isolating the extremists from the moderates, separating the religious movement from the political issues, alienating the Hindus and the Muslims from the Sikhs and by organising anti-Akali associations to challenge the Akali leadership's exclusive hold over the religious and political affairs of the Sikhs.

The split in the Akali ranks continued to widen resulting in the formation of various rival groups working against each other. The first major split took place immediately on the passage and acceptance of the Sikh Gurdwaras and Shrines Bill in July 1925. While the moderates like Sardar Bahadur Mehtab Singh, Giani Sher Singh and others came out of jail after securing conditional release and captured power. In later days: Sir the extremists like Sardar Tejas Singh Samundri, Mastot Tata, Singh, Bhag Singh Vakil, Gurcharia Singh Vakil, Sohan Singh Josh and others remained behind." Its ever, the success of the moderates was only a short-lived one, as, soon after their unconditional release, the extremists launched strong propaganda against the moderate group which had the prestige of the Akalis by accepting conditional release. During the elections to the new S. C. P. C. under the provisions of the newly passed Bill, the extremists made a clean sweep over the moderates and other pro-British elements in the Akali leadership. Further polarization took place among the extremists. While Master Tara Singh and his lieutenants captured power in the Akali politics and the S. G. P. C., staunch nationalists like Baba Kharak Singh, rising above the factional Akali politics and scramble for power, joined the mainstream of Indian nationalism as they believed that a still bigger Gurdwara, i.e., the Indian sub-continent, was yet to be liberated<sup>10</sup>.

Further, the progressives in the Akali ranks, who seem to have imbibed a Marxist bias during their early contacts with the Ghadrites, the Babbar Akalis and revolutionary elements in the country and abroad, started turning towards left-wing extremist groups in the country and ultimately joined the ranks of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha and the Kirti Kissan Party, both of which had a strong Marxist bias.

Perusal of the data available on the Akali Movement and personal interviews with some of the Jathedars shows that while the leadership of the Akali Movement was provided by middle-class Sikh nationalists, consisting of barristers, school and college teachers, retired military officers and middle-class landholders, the rank and file of Akali volunteers came from the Sikh peasantry<sup>11</sup>.

On the basis of available figures it will be no exaggeration to say that the Sikh peasantry formed the backbone of the Akali Movement. That the movement was able to achieve a large measure of success was mainly due to this class of people involving itself whole-heartedly in the Akali struggle. Out of the total number of Akali volunteers from different areas, roughly 66 per cent belonged to the Jat Sikh peasantry, the majority of them hailing from the districts of Lyallpur, Sheikhpura, Amritsar, Jullundur and Hoshiarpur. Similarly, in the case of the Akali Movement in the Sikh States the majority of participants again belonged to the peasantry.

The growing discontentment of the Sikh peasantry, which found its first organised expression in the form of the Agrarian Unrest of 1907 was fully exploited by the Ghadrite propaganda in making the rural classes aware of their exploitation at the hands of a foreign Government.

"Ghadrite activities also created a spirit of rebellion against the British authorities which continued to ferment and found expression in the form of the Akali struggle and later the terrorist activities of the Babbar militants. The demobilization of the Sikh soldiers at the end of the First World War and the unsatisfactory treatment that had been meted out to them during the War led to great discontentment. Both during the War and on their return to India they heard from their fellow villagers and relatives of the internment of nearly 5,000 of their folk for

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<sup>10</sup> Sohan Singh Josh, *Akali Morchian Da Itahas*, Daman Publishers, Ferozpur, 1986, p.62

<sup>11</sup> The Loyal Gazette, 27 February 1921, quoted in the Panjab press Abstracts, fortnight ending 28 February 1921, N.A.I.

alleged sympathy with the Ghadrtes; of the enforcement of Indent System (under which every village was compelled to provide a certain number of recruits) and of the pressure to raise funds for the War<sup>12</sup>.

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In spite of internal differences among the Akali leaders and the official patronage bestowed upon the moderate elements in opposition to the Dal, the latter acquired unfettered hold over the ShromaniGurdwaraPrabandhak Committee and the Sikh religious and political affairs.

The S. G. P. C., since its inception in October 1920, has continued to be under the exclusive control of the Akali Dal which has invariably gained a large majority in all the Gurdwara elections held from time to time<sup>14</sup>.

With its continued hold over the S. G. P. C. and its influence with the Sikh masses along with vast resources in terms of men and money, the ShromaniAkali Dal has been wielding tremendous political influence and power among the Sikh masses since the days of the Akali Movement. The precedent of religion and politics being mixed together--the former serving the latter's interests- has continued to be a great asset to the Akalis so far.

As religious places were successfully used as platforms to fight the Mahants and the Government of the day during the Akali Movement, they continue to be used as such even after the conclusion of the Movement over fifty years ago. Successful political agitations- particularly the Akali agitation for the formation of a Panjabi speaking State and more recently their unique fight against the Emergency in the country- have since been launched by the Akali leadership from the Gurdwara platform.

Mobilization of a significant part of the Sikh population and representative of various economic and social strata within the community, had occurred by 1925. Concurrently institutionalization of the political. Forces activated by the reform movement and other developments took place.

Prior to 1920, the organized channels for the expression of Sikh concerns were the conservative Chief KhalsaDiwan and is affiliated Singh Sabhas, the revolutionary movement as represented by the Ghadr Party, and certain eminent Sikh families. Contact with the Indian National Congress, particularly through the 1919 Civil Disobedience Movement, provided a model of organization for the newly mobilizing Sikhs and their emerging leaders such as Kharak Singh and Master Tara Singh<sup>15</sup>.

In retrospect, formal inauguration of the ShiromaniGurdwardParbandhak Committee (SGPC) on 12 December, 1920 can be seen as the single most important event in institutionalize!From the Government viewpoint, it could be viewed simply as an elected committee of Sikhs responsible for particular religious assets of the Sikh community. The SGPC and the reform movement did not share this limited notion of its role and function.<sup>16</sup>

From its inception, the SGPC intended to extend its control over all gurdwaras rather than the few that had been taken from or given up by the priests. A Sikh community existed and the SGPC began the process of becoming its primary institutionalized expression.Legislative legitimacy and its basic rights were accorded to the organization with passage of the SGPC Act in 1925. These rights have been confirmed in each of the succeeding Punjabs to the present.

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<sup>12</sup>Sohan Singh Josh, *AkaliMorchian Da Itehas*, Daman Publishers, Ferozpur, 1986,p.71

<sup>13</sup>RaiSethi ,*Sikh Struggle for GurdwaraReform*, Union Press, Bombay,1927,p.42

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid*,p.44

<sup>15</sup>Mohinder Singh, *Akali movement*, Publication Bureau, Patiala 2015,p.42

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid*,p.45

In conceptual terms, the SGPC can be described as a political system for a particular and varying range of Sikh affairs. Externally it has relations, both direct and indirect, with other systems such as the Punjab Government and with Sikh and other groupings which relate to SGPC concerns. Internally, the dynamics of the system have revolved around the relations between the contending political parties and groups<sup>17</sup>.

This latter aspect is perhaps best symbolized by the Teja Singh Samundri Assembly Hall in the SGPC headquarters in Amritsar which contains opposing rows of benches based on the British House of Commons model for accommodating the ruling and opposing parties. Individual Sikh leaders and their contending groups contest for supremacy locally and then within the S.P.G.C. Following independence and through the 1950s, Master Tara Singh and his Akali Dal dominated with continual challenges from the Malwa Akali Dal, the Sadh Sangat Board (Congress Sikhs) and the Desh Bhagat (Communist Sikhs).

The individuals involved subsequently changed, but the basic pattern of internally contending groups continues. Opposition to the Akali Dal in the 31 March, 1979 SGPC elections came from the Dal Khalsa, which allied with the All-India Sikh Students Federation, the Panth Khalsa and the Baba Jiwan Singh Mazhabi Dal. Dissatisfaction also appeared from the Akali Dal's women's wing, the Istri Akal Dal, when Rajinder Kaur forcefully stated her displeasure with number of allotted seats "as well as the functional alignments."<sup>81</sup> The splits that resulted in competing Akali Dals are still more significant and will be discussed separately.

Control over the SGPC through its quinquennial election of 175 members based on adult Sikh franchise (including Sahajdhari Sikhs) provides the winning party with the material and symbolic assets of the organization. Material assets included, as of 1964, direct management of 56 gurdwaras, supervision over several hundred other temples and a total budget of Rs. 6,306,000 (c. US 1,340,000) a year.<sup>32</sup> In 1970, the SGPC claimed a total revenue of nearly of Rs. 20 million (c. US \$ 2,600,000) more than twice the rupee total of 1964.<sup>33</sup> By 1977, the SGPC annual budget had climbed to Rs. 30 million (about US \$ 4 million<sup>34</sup> and by 1980 it probably reached Rs. 60 million (about US \$ 8 million).

Authority over the temples also provides access to what is probably the major political communication channel of the Sikh community. Religious and political communications are cable related in the gurdwaras, just as the Akal Takht in inextricably symbolizes the inseparability of spiritual and temporal Amritsar authority for the Sikh community,<sup>36</sup> More conventional media utilized<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup>Harcharan Singh Bajwa, *Fifty Years of Punjab Politics Issue and Trends*, Delhi, 1988, p.51

<sup>18</sup>Rai Sethi, *Sikh Struggle for Gurdwara Reform*, Union Press, Bombay, 1927, p.117