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SPECIAL FEATURE: SHIROMANI AKALI DAL

Legendary leaders



SARABJIT PANDHER

The Shiromani Akali Dal has been built by a long line of great leaders.

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Baba Kharak Singh, the `Iron Man'.

THE Shiromani Akali Dal has produced leaders, often referred to as jathedars, who, after displaying exemplary commitment to their cause, faded into history owing to the absence of proper documentation. Neither was there a realisation of this at the party level, nor did their low-profile acts of major success attract contemporary historians.

The role of Jathedar Kartar Singh Virk alias Jhabbar in the struggles that led to the creation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) and the Shiromani Akali Dal seemed to have set high standards for those who followed. A descendant of the legendary Jhabbar chiefs of Sheikhpura (now in Pakistan), he was accepted as a leader who faced the most daunting tasks.

While he started off as a religious preacher in 1904, Jhabbar became known as a dedicated `sewadar' (volunteer) of the Singh Sabha movement, defending and later organising ceremonies where members of the lower castes were encouraged to join the Sikh faith.

On April 13, 1919, British troops fired on a peaceful congregation at Jallianwala Bagh, which provoked rioting and arson. Jathedar Jhabbar and some of his colleagues were arrested and after a few days they were handed out death sentences or incarceration in the cellular jail in Andaman Islands. Subsequently, when the police found no evidence of his involvement in the riots, the death sentence was reduced to life term. On being released from jail in 1920, Jhabbar was back to work in Punjab villages. Simultaneously, the Akalis launched the gurdwara reform movement, and along with his close friend Teja Singh Bhuchar, Jhabbar was called upon to undertake 'actions' for the liberation of the shrines from the mahants. Both played important roles in organising the congregation of Sikhs at the Akal Takht, which led to the creation of the SGPC. He led the group that liberated Gurdwara Panja Sahib at Hasan Abdal on November 20, 1920, and subsequently secured the shrine at Sacha Sauda, where Sikhs narrated tales of pilgrims being looted and raped on the premises of Gurdwara Nankana Sahib. An Akali group, which had gone to seek control of this shrine associated with the birth of Guru Nanak Dev, was attacked; many lost their lives. The next morning, Jathedars Jhabbar and Bhuchar organised another group, including some local people, for resistance. While the gurdwara was subsequently taken over by the SGPC, the Akalis' peaceful conduct in the Nankana episode was commended nationwide. Jhabbar then went on to organise the liberation of Gurdwaras Guru Ka Bagh and Babe Ki Ber along with four other shrines. Realising that the morchas at Jaito and Bhai Pheru could be long drawn, Jhabbar toured Punjab to arrange volunteers for the struggle. After he was arrested, a British court sentenced him to 18 years in jail. The hardships Jhabbar suffered shattered his health, and this forced the government to release him within four and a half years. After the Sikh Gurdwaras Act was legislated in 1925, Jathedar Jhabbar and his squad initiated the process of securing for the SGPC possession of the properties attached to the shrines. After Partition in 1947, Jhabbar was engaged in the resettlement of refugees. In 1962, after a brief illness, he passed away at the age of 88.

BABA KHARAK SINGH

Known as the iron man of Akali politics, Baba Kharak Singh played a pivotal role in the creation of the SGPC and in leading the Sikh community to securing the keys of the treasury of the Golden Temple through "*Morcha Chabbian da Guchha*". He was the son of a wealthy contractor and industrialist, Rai Bahadur Sardar Hari Singh.

As president of the eighth session of the Sikh Educational Conference at Tarn Taran in 1913, he refused permission for a resolution wishing victory to the British in the First World War. The protests against the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre brought Kharak Singh centre stage in Sikh politics, and in 1920 he was president of the Central Sikh League Council, which under his direction led Sikhs to participate in the non-cooperation movement launched by Gandhi. He was elected president of the SGPC in 1921 and in the year following, president of the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee.

The period also witnessed Baba Kharak Singh successfully leading the Akalis in the Gurdwara Reforms Movement as well as in anti-British agitations, for which he was sent to jail many times. The enactment of the Sikh Gurdwaras Act came in 1925, and soon after his re-election as president of the statutory SGPC, in 1930, the Baba resigned to dedicate himself to national independence.

While the people's response that led to the success of the Akali movement had unnerved the British administration, historians say that it also surprised Mahatma Gandhi, who found in it the vindication of the use of non-violence as a political instrument. Several national leaders came to Punjab to see the way the satyagraha was being conducted, with

complete commitment and discipline.

It is recorded that the Baba, in 1928-29, opposed the Nehru Committee Report until the Congress party undertook to secure Sikhs' concurrence in the framing of future constitutional proposals. He then unsuccessfully rallied against the Communal Award, which gave statutory majority to Muslims in the Punjab. A firm nationalist then, he opposed both the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan and the Akali proposal for an Azad Punjab. After 1947, he retired from politics to stay in Delhi, where he died in 1963 at the age of 95.

MASTER TARA SINGH

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Master Tara Singh, who was "Masterji" to his followers..

Master Tara Singh, who came from a Hindu family and was baptised as a Sikh, hogged the limelight in the freedom struggle and in the Akali movements both before and after Independence. He refused to accept a direct commission in the Royal Indian Army as he wanted to be an educationist; subsequently he was referred to as "Masterji" by his supporters, followers and opponents.

In a more recent tribute, the Chairman of the National Minorities Commission, Tarlochan Singh, says: "After Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) no Sikh had such vast influence in the community as Master Tara Singh." Every Sikh leader of modern times was in fact his creation. Pratap Singh Kairon was his secretary, while India's first Defence Minister, Baldev Singh, was his nominee; Swaran Singh was made a Minister and leader of the Akali Assembly Party in Lahore by him and Hukam Singh, who rose to be the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, owed his entry into Parliament to him. Even Buta Singh was picked by him and made a Member of Parliament in 1962.

When he started his career as the headmaster of Khalsa High School at Lyallpur (now in Pakistan), Tara Singh would retain just Rs.15 from his monthly salary of Rs.150. He donated the rest to the school funds, keeping to his resolve to remain poor and devote his life to the service of his people.

When a large number of Sikhs were killed in the Nankana Sahib episode

of the Gurdwara Reforms Movement, Master Tara Singh quit his teaching profession and became a whole-time public worker. He was the first general secretary of the SGPC and later was its president for several terms. Like Baba Kharak Singh, after the enactment of the Gurdwara Act, 1925, Master Tara Singh is said to have declared, "Now it is our duty to struggle for the freedom of our biggest gurdwara, our country, from the clutches of British imperialism." While he was arrested on various occasions, along with other Akalis, he remained a member of the Indian National Congress until 1940.

In 1947, Master Tara Singh opposed the formation of Pakistan; he raised slogans against the move outside the Punjab Assembly in Lahore. He refused the offer of an autonomous Sikh state within the political boundaries of Pakistan. After Independence, he led the Akali Dal demanding the re-demarcation of the boundaries of Punjab on a linguistic basis. During this struggle he was arrested in 1949, 1953, 1955 and 1960. He died on November 22, 1967, in Amritsar. Recently, the Union government honoured him by placing his portrait in the Central Hall of Parliament.

GIANI KARTAR SINGH

The pictures of Giani Kartar Singh, sporting a dishevelled turban and a flowing beard, depict his frugal lifestyle. Considered by some as second only to Master Tara Singh in the evolution of the Akali party, the Giani joined politics under similar circumstances and suffered a series of incarcerations.

As a reaction to the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan, in 1943, Giani Kartar Singh put forth the proposal of creating an "Azad Punjab", where no community was in absolute majority. Earlier he played a vital role in bringing about a rapprochement between the Akalis and the Union Party, leading to the Baldev-Sikander Pact of 1942 and a coalition government.

In 1947, Giani Kartar Singh was the president of the Shiromani Akali Dal when he sought transfer of population and property as an essential component of Partition of the country. On March 17, 1948, under his leadership, the working committee of the Dal passed a resolution allowing Akali members of East Punjab to join the Congress. Through negotiations with the then Chief Minister, Bhim Sen Sachar, this Akali leader succeeded in demarcating the State into Hindi- and Punjabi-speaking areas under the Giani-Sachar formula, which ultimately led to the demand for "Punjabi Suba" on a linguistic basis. In 1956, the Akalis once again merged with the Congress. The Giani was a Minister in various subsequent governments until he resigned from the Congress in 1967. He died on June 10, 1974.

Often referred as 'Loh Purash' (Iron Man) Jathedar Jagdev Singh Talwandi took centre stage at various controversial and crucial moments in Akali history. While he courted arrest in the "Punjabi Suba Morcha", the Jathedar was the dictator of the Karnal Morcha for the restoration of civil liberties in Haryana. He was in the first group that courted arrest agitating against the Emergency, on July 9, 1975. As party chief he forged a coalition with the Janata Party to form the government in 1977. It was under his leadership that the party, in its general house at Ludhiana in 1978, adopted the Anandpur Sahib resolution, which sought a federal structure of autonomous States. Akali-baiters described the document as secessionist. In 2000, he was elected president of the SGPC.

SANT LONGOWAL



Sant Harchand Singh Longowal.

Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, basically a missionary, rose to such a position in Punjab politics that he was selected as the "dictator" of two major morchas, to protest against imposition of the Emergency, and subsequently the "Dharamyudh", to seek justice for Punjab and more powers for the States.

His tenure as party chief from 1980 onwards was marked by extreme turmoil and challenges for the Sikh community. The holiest Sikh shrine, the Golden Temple, was taken over by militants led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, and to flush them out, the Indian Army carried out the "Operation Bluestar" in 1984. Sikhs in various parts of the country were massacred following the assassination of Indira Gandhi later that year.

However, despite opposition from a dominant section in the party, Sant Longowal agreed to sign an agreement with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1985, under which many demands of the Akalis were accepted. In the subsequent elections, Akalis formed the government in Punjab with Surjit Singh Barnala as Chief Minister. The Sant was shot by extremists on August 20, 1985, at the gurdwara in Sherpur. A typical Akali leader, who led an austere life, Jathedar Gurcharan Singh Tohra was always a force to be reckoned with in Sikh politics, especially after the 1970s. After taking over charge in 1973, Jathedar Tohra went on to create a record of sorts by getting elected as president of the SGPC 27 times. For this he is still fondly referred to as "Pradhanji" or "Bapu".

On countless occasions he was the bridge between various streams of ideology in Akali politics, and he earned the title of "Panth the Roshan dimag" (enlightened brain for the Sikh faith). His farm holdings never grew; he never became a Minister either in the State or at the Centre. Though he became the general secretary of the Patiala unit of the party in 1947 and hogged the limelight during the Punjabi Suba Morcha and the agitation against the Emergency, Tohra always played key roles without ever becoming the president of the Akali Dal.

However, the real test for Jathedar Tohra's leadership came in the late 1970s, when extremist elements took control of the Golden Temple leading to the tragic events of 1984. This transformed Jathedar Tohra into a bitter anti-Centre crusader who refused to accept the Rajiv-Longowal Pact. He was instrumental in pulling down another Akali

government in 1988, when the then Chief Minister, Surjit Singh Barnala, ordered the first edition of the police action "Operation Black Thunder" on the Golden Temple complex.

Tohra along with his contemporary Prakash Singh Badal, in 1996, celebrated the 75th anniversary of the party, which in alliance with the BJP was seen to be an "invincible" combination and swept to power in 1997. He played his final innings in reviving the party, which had developed inertia after the present Congress government led by Capt. Amarinder Singh went on the offensive. At the age of 79, on March 31, 2004, he passed away while supervising the cleaning of the holy tank of the Golden Temple.



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