

# **Sikh Gurdwaras in History and Role of Jhabbar**

**By Karnail Singh**

The sad romantic aura of the Sikh gurdwaras' long history continues to prevail in the Sikh psyche, for it is a vital link in the story of the country on the line of invasion and the people— a race nurtured in storing In order to fully grasp the ethos of their tale, we have to study the Indian history of the past 500 years, when a unique mystic prophet, Guru Nanak, and his nine successor gurus (1469-1708), in pursuit of creating a nation of self-respecting people out of a down-trodden and humiliated society, set the heights around them ablaze with noble and enduring lessons of valour and piety. They grappled with destiny, and their deeds of daring dazzle history. Such is the example which nations need to electrify them.

## **SIKH GURDWARAS AND HARIMANDAR**

According to Shamsher Singh Ashok, 'The first ever Sikh dharamsala (gurdwara) established by Guru Nanak, was the residence of Sajjan thag at village Makhdoompur in Multan area (Pakistan), which still exists in its original form. Thereafter, wherever the Guru went during his long travels throughout India, Sri Lanka, Middle East, Afghanistan and Tibet, he made dharamsalas where people who accepted his religious principles would meet and sing God's praises. During the period of the first three gurus (1469- 1574), a large number of people in India and abroad had embraced the new faith, which called for a central place of worship. Accordingly, under guidance of the third guru, Guru Amar Das, Bhai Jetha, later Guru Ram Das, assisted by experienced and devoted Sikhs like Baba Budha and others began excavation of two tanks, Santokh Sar and Amrit Sarowar at Chak Guru, later Amritsar, and completed the worthy 1577. The tanks, however, remained kacha until the fifth guru, Guru Arjun, ascended the gurgaddi in 1581. By 1604, Harimandar (Golden Temple) was built in the middle of Amrit Sarowar, and Guru Granth Sahib, since compiled, was installed therein. Soon grew, around this nucleus, several bazaars and residential quarters where traders, artisans, builders, labourers and devotees began to reside. The entire Sikh people looked upon this centre as the body and soul of their new faith. They began to pay homage to the Guru and the Harimandar, and made liberal offerings for further constructions and to the common kitchen. This central temple and Guru Granth Sahib gave Sikhism the shape of a regular church.

The ever increasing importance and popularity of the new faith excited suspicion in the mind of Emperor Jahangir, who considered it dangerous to the state and to his own faith, Islam. In his autobiography, he records, "A Hindu, Arjun by name, lived.... in the garb of pir and sheikh, and had captivated the hearts of simple-minded Hindus and stupid Muslims.... They called him Guru, and from all directions fools were attracted towards him.... For years the thought had been occurring to me that I should either put an end to this false traffic or that he should be brought into the fold of Islam.... I ordered that he be put to death with tortures and that

his property be confiscated". "Guru Arjun's last injunction to his 11 years old son, Hargobind, was to sit fully armed on his throne and maintain an army to the best of his ability".

## AKAL TAKHT

Accordingly, on ascending the gurgaddi, he called upon his followers to come to him with weapons and horses. Thus began to be assembled a sizable force at his command for service in defence of Dharma and protection of the weaker sections of society against oppression whether from state or individual. He built the Akal Takht just in front of Harimandar. The Guru attended the morning religious service in the shrine, and held open darbar in the afternoon at Akal Takht, where discussions took place for strengthening the faith, besides redressal of public grievances by the Guru. Also, musicians and dhadis sang melodious vars and ballads of heroes of yore which thrilled the young and old. "This blending of the religious sovereignty and worldly supremacy in the presence of the Guru, viz., the concept of miri-piri in the Sikh tradition since Guru Nanak, was thus resoundingly re-affirmed; PB Guru Hargobind had to fight four defensive battles between 1628-1634. Thereafter, he decided to reside at Kiratpur, away from the local centres of state power. The management of Harimandar and other gurdwaras then passed on to the Minas, descendants of Pirthia, elder brother of Guru Arjun, and remained with them and others till 1699

## . MOST DIFFICULT PHASE AND ULTIMATE SUCCESS

During this period, "The Sikhs of Amritsar were greatly agitated at the deterioration of services at Harimandar. They approached Guru Gobind Singh at Anandpur Sahib in 1699 and apprised him of the prevailing state of affairs. The Guru deputed Bhai Mani Singh, with five devoted Sikhs, to take charge of the Harimandar, Akal Takht and other gurdwaras" Bhai Mani Singh performed this difficult task in accordance with the Sikh religious principles till his martyrdom in 1734, first with the help of baptized Sikhs and later with the assistance of Udasi sadhus, when state oppression against the faith reached its extremes. During the dark half century (1716-65), "political decisions of Sikhs were generally governed by the needs of Harimandar." Religious functions were, then, performed by the Udasi sadhus, while the responsibility to protect the shrine fell on a handful of devout Sikhs. Besides two general massacres of Sikhs (ghalugharas) in 1746 and 1762, Harimandar was desecrated several times by the state officials, and was completely demolished thrice with gun powder, and the holy tank filled up with the debris of buildings and bodies of slaughtered men and cows by the mighty Abdali in 1757, 1762 and 1764. History still stands amazed at the deeds of valour and sacrifices of Sikh saint-soldiers in defence of Dharam and the motherland, who not only avenged the desecration of their shrines, rebuilt Harimandar after every demolition with greater vigour, but also captured Lahore in 1765, struck the coin in the Guru's name, conquered vast portions of Punjab by 1799, (upto Multan during the life of Abdali who died in 1772), when the legendary Maharaja Ranjit Singh, with amazing astuteness and daring, established the Sikh Empire comprising Punjab, Sind, Kashmir, Ladhakh, Baluchistan and Tibet.

During their ascendancy, 1765-1849, the Sikh Misl Sardars and Maharaja Ranjit Singh built new gurdwaras at places of important events and those visited by the Gurus throughout India. They sanctioned liberal jagirs and grants for further constructions, their improvements and for the common kitchen, which catered to the needs of pilgrims and others. Throughout the misl period, 1765-1799, Harimandar and Akal Takht remained the rallying point of Sikh religion and politics. They held Sarbat Khalsa, took all important decisions at Akal Takht, and initiated the newcomers to the fold of Khalsa.

## BUNGAS

The Misl Sardars were greatly interested in promoting learning and literature. They granted jagirs, stipends and allowances to scholars and bungas. Between 1765 and 1833, 74 bungas were built around the Harimandar. The primary objective of their construction was to provide the central shrine a ready line of defence. The chiefs of prominent misls were asked to keep their jathas in a state of readiness for any emergency. Bungas were also used for accommodation of pilgrims and travelers. They became seats of learning and of fine arts as well. For instance, Kapurthala Bunga was famous for interpretation/commentaries on Guru Granth Sahib and training of ragis, rababis and dhadis. The Kaithalwala Bunga was known as 'Bunga of Gianis'. Giani Sant Singh, Head Priest of Harimandar, during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's period, and Mahakavi Bhai Santokh Singh of 'Suraj Parkash' fame were the product of this bunga. Shaheed Rattan Singh Bhangu, the first ever Sikh historian, author of 'Prachin Panth Parkash' was thrown up by Bunga Sham Singh. Teaching of Sanskrit, Gurmukhi, Medicine, Calligraphy and other fine arts was imparted there for about 200 years. Akal Bunga was of great eminence. According to Doctor Leitner, the first principal of Oriental College, Lahore, there were five Gurmukhi schools and three Sanskrit pathshalas in these bungas. No fees were charged from the students. On the contrary, free boarding and lodging was provided. The total expenses were met by the concerned Chiefs and Sardars.

"These bungas could be categorized as: (a) misl bungas, (b) personal bungas, (c) community bungas and (d) ecclesiastical bungas. These were named after the name of Misl Sardars who built them, and were considered panthic property since their very inception. In view of their great contribution to the strengthening of Sikh faith in the matter of teaching Gurbani, in providing security to the holy precincts, and in their being places of great learning and culture, the words, 'Jhande Bunge Jugo Jug Atal (may the Sikh flag and bungas prevail for ever) were included in the daily Sikh ardas".

In 1765, Amritsar was jointly ruled by the Sikh Misl Sardars. After reconstruction of Harimandar and cleaning of the holy tank, services in the Harimandar were reorganized. Gopal Das Udasi was still the panthi there. He neglected his duties and misappropriated funds. Besides, he was a clean shaved Udasi and wore a cap. With the consent of the sangat, therefore, he was removed and a baptized devout Sikh, Chanchal Singh, was appointed in his place. Maharaja Ranjit Singh showed exemplary devotion in the service of his faith and Harimandar. Immediately

after his occupation of Amritsar, he gifted the income from the city octroi to Harimandar, and granted liberal jagir for the community kitchen. Sardar Lehna Singh Majithia, a chief of great genius and piety, was put in charge of Harimandar, and Giani Sant Singh, an erudite scholar in Gurbani, was appointed Head panthi. The number of persons associated with services in Harimandar and its management was between 500-600. Construction of new bungas was taken up for pilgrims besides one for his own use. He built additional buildings in the holy precincts. For services in gold and marble, he donated rupees 16 lakhs, and it was after covering of the Harimandar with gold leaf that it got the popular name of Golden Temple. The best artists available were employed for naqqashi. Revenue free lands, worth over a lakh of rupees a year, were granted to various office holders in the Harimandar. He donated to Harimandar several pieces of rare art and of high cost such as a canopy embedded with gold and studded with diamonds, emeralds, rubies and pearls, a bejewelled headband worth millions of rupees, another canopy equally precious, and a sword with a gold handle studded with jewels and pearls. According to the court historian, Sohan Lal Suri, the Maharaja had even willed that after his death his personal horses, about twelve hundred, be sent to Harimandar. The Maharaja would generally attend Baisakhi, Diwali and Dusehra festivals at Harimandar, besides amawas and sankrat days of every month. He would invariably visit Harimandar after every successful campaign throughout his life and make large gifts and offerings to all important gurdwaras.

Ruchi Ram Sahni records, 'By the time of death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the pujaris of gurdwaras had become negligent in their duties due to the indifference of Dogra ministers, and certain undue changes crept into the previous system of Gurmat'.

## GURDWARAS DURING BRITISH PERIOD

With the fraudulent British occupation of Punjab in 1849, a new era of misfortunes, sufferings, humiliations and distortions of religion, culture and history of Sikhs began. Lord Dalhousie, then Governor General of India, in a private letter wrote, "Our actions require no explanation. If the Sikhs, after this (second Anglo-Sikh war) is over, rise again, they shall entrench themselves behind a dunghill and Fight with their fingernails, for if I live twelve months, they shall have nothing else left to fight with." K.C. Yadav records, "The Board of Administration of Punjab at the very outset, took in hand the work of suppression and coercion of the war-like Sikhs.... The first target of suppression was the 11 years old Maharaja Dalip Singh, who was made to resign for himself, his heirs and his successors, all rights, title and claim to the sovereignty of the Punjab. The vast state properties, including some world famous marvels, were confiscated... Maharani Jindan, mother of the deposed Maharaja, was exiled, interned at Banaras and later at Chinar Fort... The Governor General directed that Chiefs and fief holders should be effectively deprived of the power to do mischief.... It was the Sikh soldiery that the British dreaded the most. Immediately on annexation, 50,000 of them were dis-banded... All classes of people other than Europeans were prohibited from keeping arms. In a short period, 1,20,000 arms of different kinds were seized.... The British not only destroyed the royal house of the Sikhs and ruined their nobility, but also their social organizations such as village

panchayats... They further ruined their economic prosperity by removal of soldiers and civil servants and the consequent unemployment. The new revenue system pauperized the peasantry".

He adds, "There was an attack on the Sikh religion too. Christian Missions were established in Punjab as a thanks giving to Almighty God for victory against a terrible foe. Then began a direct attempt of converting Sikhs to Christianity. In July 1852, the first conversion of a Sikh took place in the vicinity of Golden Temple itself. In 1853, Maharaja Dalip Singh was converted. It was in keeping with the policy set out to convert the entire Sikh population. Opinions by high British officers were openly expressed to destroy the Golden Temple, for it could become the centre of hope and aspirations of a great people, and may some day prove the rallying point for the Sikhs. An anonymous writer wrote in the Calcutta Review in 1859, "Leave it (Golden Temple)... to itself and withdraw from it the patronage of the state: resume the lands set aside for it... and the splendour of the institution will pass away. The gilded dome will lose its lustre, the marble walls fall out of its repair... to act thus would be to act impartially and in accordance with true principles of non-interference". As a matter of policy, the spirit of the Khalsa was intended to be killed. Their language, traditions, manners and customs were suppressed. The Administrative Report (1849-51) said, "The Sikh faith and ecclesiastical policy is rapidly going where the Sikh political ascendancy has already gone. These men joined Sikhism in thousands and they now desert in equal numbers. Gurmukhi is rapidly falling into desuetude. The Punjabi as a spoken language is also losing its currency and degenerating into a mere rustic dialogue." G.S. Dhillon very aptly writes, "The Waqf Act of 1861 gave the control and management of the holy places of the Hindus and Muslims to the communities concerned, but in the case of Sikh gurdwaras, the Act was not applied on political grounds. The properties of Sikh places of worship were transferred and given over to the Udasi mahants and others throughout the Punjab. A significant blow was given by the British to the Sikh religion, when they conferred proprietary rights to the temple mahants, Brahmins, Udasis or Nirmalas, most of whom had Hindu leanings, and hardly understood or had faith in the Sikh religion and its practices. This was an extremely subtle method by which the British sought to secure the undoing of the ideological base of the Sikhs".

He adds, "The Government wanted to maintain the gurdwaras as channels of indirect control of Sikhs". He concluded, "There were two aspects of British policy towards Sikhs. First, their political suppression, second, their ideological erosion by a studied patronage of Hinduised mahants and pujaris through government nominated managers of their shrines."

There was even a proposal under government consideration to either sell or mortgage the entire Golden Temple Complex including Akal Takht to a non-Sikh, so that under law of possession and ownership, the Sikhs could be permanently deprived of their most sacred shrines. When a deputation of eminent Sikhs was told by the Viceroy that the government was legally competent to do so, the Sikhs in their utter helplessness could think of no other means than to initiate an Akhand Path in Harimandar and offer Ardas that Guru Ram Das himself come to their

succour. Accordingly, an Akhand Path was started on April 20, 1877, and when the sangat was listening to Asa-Di-Var kirtan at 4.30 a.m., a balloon like flashing light entered Harimandar through the northern door, stood before Guru Granth Sahib for a while and then went out through the southern door, and, passing over the holy tank, ascended toward the sky and disappeared. Hundreds of devotees made their obeisance in thankfulness to the Guru, and felt reassured that no earthly power could desecrate the holy shrine. After this revelation, the temple authorities recorded the incident on a plate of bronze, which still remains hung on the entrance door of Harimandar. It was after receiving intelligence reports from its agents who were present in the Harimandar, that the Government gave up its wicked plan.

Thus beleaguered, the Sikhs were smarting and smouldering, but felt helpless against the Government. "By an order of the Governor General, the control of the Golden Temple was entrusted to the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar in 1859 with no rules for management laid down. The internal matters of the shrine were left to be dealt with by the priests. The Temple had an annual income of several lakhs of rupees, The pujaris, mahants, ragis and other functionaries received customary share of the offerings, and asserted proprietary rights over the landed properties of the shrine. This created dissensions, and soon there was a formidable list of disputes going on in courts among them".

On a large number of complaints by the Sikhs to the Deputy Commissioner against this mismanagement, he formed a committee of prominent Sikhs who framed a Dastur-ul-Amal for carrying out services in the Temple. But this failed to bring any improvement. The internal affairs of the shrine remained in the hands of mahants and pujaris, who after the loss of political power by Sikhs, lost all fear of sangat, neglected their duties and indulged in malpractices. By 1883, this committee of the Sikhs became defunct and a sarbrah began to be appointed by the Deputy Commissioner who was made responsible for the entire administration of the Temple. They were selfish people and Government stooges. "In the meantime, some Hindu priests were ushered in, which resulted in observance of non-Sikh services. Even some idols were installed in the parkarma, and areas around it began to be used for commercial purposes. Unscrupulous persons began to sell pornographic literature there, and scenes of moral degradation became routine practice. This extremely disgusting management remained in force till 1920 in spite of several efforts by the devout Sikhs and their sympathisers to improve matters". This unfortunate atmosphere was prevalent in all the major gurdwaras, for it was in keeping with the policy of the Government.

G.S. Dhillon again succinctly observes, "Under the circumstances, chances of a successful political battle against the British being slim, the Sikhs considered it essential to strengthen their religious base which was the source of their zeal and vigour. Accordingly, Singh Sabha, a socio-religious movement was launched in 1873 for this purpose by educating Sikhs in their religion and traditions. By 1882, entire Punjab, rural as well as urban, was covered by establishing Singh Sabhas. Having discretely reconstructed these aspects of Sikh society slowly and surely, the Singh Sabha Movement took up the political problems as well. With the formation of Chief

Khalsa Diwan in 1902, there came a significant change in the attitude of Singh Sabha leaders towards politics. They took upon themselves to safeguard the political rights of the Sikh"

Between the years 1902 and 1920, there were several occasions of political conflict between the Government and the Sikhs, such as the Colonisation Bill of 1907, the management of Khalsa College, Amritsar, the Komagata Maru episode of 1914, the Gadar and Non-cooperation Movements and the Rowlat Act agitation resulting in the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, and the imposition of martial law in the Punjab in 1919, etc., etc. "Matters, however, came to a head in 1912 in the field of gurdwara reforms, when in building the new capital, the Government of India acquired gurdwara land and demolished an old boundary wall of Rakab Ganj in Delhi. The Sikhs seized this opportunity to challenge the mahant's right to alienate the Gurdwara property, and threatened to launch a morcha, but this had to be postponed because of the First World War". The matter was again taken up when Sardul Singh Caveeshar issued an appeal in the 'Akali' of Lahore of Sept. 2, 1920, "Wanted hundred martyrs to save gurdwaras". Within a fortnight, seven hundred offers were received. It was then decided by the Central Sikh League to send volunteers to take forcible possession of the Rakab Ganj land. The Government realising the gravity of the situation, restored the acquired land to a hastily formed body of Delhi Sikhs, declared to rebuild the 322 feet long demolished wall before Sardul Singh Caveeshar and volunteers reached Delhi, and thus avoided open confrontation with the Sikhs. Though the Government was able to stall this movement by its timely action, the Sikhs were now soon to storm the bastions which the Raj had so strenuously sought to protect.

#### JATHEDAR KARTAR SINGH JHABBAR

Jathedar Kartar Singh Jhabbar (1874-1962) was the grandson of Sardar Mangal Singh whom Sardar Maha Singh Sukherchak twice failed to subdue. Later Maharaja Ranjit Singh compromised with the Jhabbars and appointed Sardar Mangal Singh as Kumedan in his forces. Jhabbar had little education, but had noble inclinations and a healthy mind in a healthy body. He would attend religious gatherings along with his friends, and listen to Gurbani and political speeches. With three years of training in a Vidyalaya in Gurbani and Sikh tradition, he himself became a preacher of no small merit. In 1912, he established a Khatsa Diwan, Khan Sauda, Bar and a large number of Singh Sabhas in the new colonies of Lyallpur and Sheikhpur districts. During the stormy days of Martial Law in 1919, he was sentenced to be hanged with six others of his area being a ring leader for political reasons, although he had been ceaselessly helping the victims of hooliganism during the disturbances. Death penalty was later commuted to transportation for life. During his one year of jail in Andaman islands, he became an associate of such eminent patriots as Savarkar brothers, Bhai Parmanand, Baba Nidhan Singh Chuga, Udham Singh Kesale of Tosha Maru fame, and others. This further sharpened his consciousness of India's political slavery and misuse of the Sikh holy shrines, and he plunged headlong into the Gurdwara Reform Movement and the independence struggle, when as a result of general amnesty, he returned to Punjab in 1920.

## GURDWARA BABE-DI-BER

On account of mis-management in Babe Di Ber gurdwara, Sialkot, local devout Sikhs sought the help of the Central Majha Diwan, Tarn Taran to improve it. A jatha of 50 volunteers went there, who soon realised that more volunteers were needed. Jhabbar with 300 of his men reached Sialkot and in spite of tough opposition by the local Hindus, took possession of the gurdwara and its assets, constituted a local managing committee under Baba Kharak Singh, and came back. This happened in early October, 1920.

## HARIMANDAR AND AKAL TAKHT

On their way back, when Jhabbar and his companions went to Harimandar, they learnt that the pujaris were refusing to accept parshad brought by the Khalsaiwarfan of Ravidasia Sikhs, although members of Chief Khalsa Diwan and some Sikh Professors of Khalsa College, Amritsar, were persuading them to do so. Then, Jhabbar forcefully entered into discussion with the pujaris and asked them to show any scriptural evidence for their refusal and whether the gurdwaras were their ancestral property. He told them in no uncertain terms that the Sikh Panth was the real custodian of these holy shrines and that they were mere employees. He warned them to act according to the wishes of the sangat or else they would be thrown out. He also suggested to have the guidance from Guru Granth Sahib in the matter, which the pujaris agreed to. When Guru Granth Sahib was opened at random, the following verse was taken as the Guru's hukm:

;'fom wj bk 3 d[ s[ eh . .  
fBr[ fDnk B' nkg/ pKyf; bJ/ GkJh ;fsr[ o eh ;/tk bkfJ . .  
;fsr[ o eh ;/tk T[ sw j? GkJh okfw Bkfw fus[ bkfJ . . 1 . .  
jfo ihU[ nkg/ pyf; fwbkfJ ..  
r[DjhD jw ngokXh GkJh g{ o/ ;fsrfo bJ/ obkfJ . . ojkT[ . .

At this revelation, it was agreed that the parshad by the Khalsa baradari be distributed among the sangat, but Jhabbar insisted that the distribution of parshad should begin with the pujaris who were managing the Shrine. Some of the pujaris declined and walked away. Jhabbar then announced to the sangat that the ceremony of parshad by the Ravidasia Sikhs would also be repeated at Akal Takht immediately thereafter. On learning this, the pujaris of Akal Takht left the place and went to their homes. In this manner, possession of Harimandar and Akal Takht was taken by the Sikhs from the pujaris and mahants on October 12, 1920.

At the Akal Takht congregation, Jhabbar made a spirited speech and asked for such volunteers as were ready to face even death, transportation for life and confiscation of property for sanctity of the Shrine. Out of a sangat of about 8,000, only 18 persons including Jhabbar himself came forward. They were constituted into a managing board of the Shrine, and Teja



Singh Bhuchar was appointed jothedar of Akal Takht. Next day, the pujaris tried to take possession of the holy premises through hooligans of the city, but failed in the face of the determined opposition by the management board and then- associates.

On October 13, 1920, the Deputy Commissioner, Amritsar, summoned Jhabbar and his associates to his residence. He informed them of the Governor's written orders to hand over the holy complex to a properly constituted committee, for, it was a religious matter of the Sikhs, and the Government did not desire to interfere in it in any manner. On the Deputy Commissioner's asking, a temporary committee of nine members was formed there and then, to whom he gave the possession of Harimandar and Akal Takht in writing. On November 13, the Punjab Government, in consultation with the Maharaja of Patiala, constituted a committee of 36, all reformers, with power to co-opt others, to manage the Golden Temple and all gurdwaras in Punjab and other parts of India. On a hukamnama, a congregation comprising more than 10,000 people assembled at Akal Takht on November 15, 1920. A Management body of 175 baptised Sikhs including the 36 appointed by Government, named as Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), was formed unanimously, and Sir Sundar Singh Majithia selected as its first president. Members were also co-opted to represent Sikh States and Sikh Bodies in Burma, Malaya, China and America.

#### CENTRAL SIKH LEAGUE

A meeting of the Central Sikh League was to take place at Lahore on October 18 to 20, 1920, which was to be addressed by Mahatma Gandhi, who had launched a Non-cooperation Movement against the Government. It was apprehended that the Sikhs might as well join it. The Governor of the Punjab, therefore, sent Executive Counsellor, Sardar Gopal Singh Bhagowalia, to meet Jhabbar and to inform him that the Sikhs' political demands such as Gurdwara Reforms, removal of ban on kirpan, 33% seats for the Sikhs in the Provincial Assembly, release of political prisoners, etc., would be met by the Government, if the Sikh League refrained from passing the Non-cooperation resolution. Jhabbar, in his two hours speech in the Sikh League meeting, forcefully pleaded that Sikhs must make maximum sacrifices for the country's freedom, but should not join the Congress until it guaranteed to safeguard their political rights. Mahatma Gandhi, during his address, advised Sikhs not to turn out mahants from gurdwaras, for it implied use of force and exhorted them to take up Congress work with greater vigour. As the meeting arrangement was in the hands of pro-Congress elements in the Sikh League, Non-cooperation resolution was passed.

#### GURDWARA PANJA SAHIB

Mahant Mitha Singh of Panja Sahib gurdwara had given contract to a Hindu grocer, who along with karah parshad for offering in the shrine, also sold tobacco items, and himself often smoked. An army man, on seeing the karah parshad arrangement, had an argument with the contractor, refused to buy parshad from him and went inside the gurdwara to pay homage to

Guru Granth Sahib. The mahant, on hearing this, showed no regrets, and instead his brother seriously wounded the army man with a gun shot. The incident became a hot subject matter of news letters far and wide. By this time, possession of Harimandar and Akal Takht had been recently taken by the Sikhs. Afraid of the publicity against him by this news, the mahant came to Amritsar to see for himself how the new arrangements of the gurdwaras worked. When he saw the tall and sturdy Central Majha Diwan volunteers in blue uniforms, with drawn kirpan and steel quoits over their heads, guarding the shrines, he was so terrified that he immediately went back, lost his mental balance and died within two days in spite of medical help. A telegram was received at Amritsar from the granthi of Cambelpur Singh Sabha, "Mahant Mitha Singh died. Send jatha urgently". The matter was discussed in the Amritsar Gurdwara Committee. Pro-Congress Sikhs argued that Gandhi thought that the British would be leaving India in less than a year's time, and taking possession of gurdwaras could wait till then. Jhabbar thought that freedom would not come that soon, and in case it did, the task of taking possession of shrines from mahouts with Hindu leanings would not only be difficult but totally impossible. It was decided that Jhabbar with 25 devout Sikhs should go and take possession of the shrine. The jatha reached Panja Sahib on November 19, 1920, and walked in fours in military manner to the gurdwara. The jatha remained there for the next 20 days. The daily ups and downs of the situation they had to pass through, cannot be explained in detail except to say that at times there was stiff opposition by the local Hindu majority population, often spearheaded by hooligans and the paid ruffians of the mahant, and as a last resort, by hundreds of Hindu women who entered and stayed in the gurdwara premises for a day and night. They made vile attempts to make the situation violent, but Jhabbar's matchless devotion to the Panthic cause, his tenacity, courage, tact and manly behaviour, coupled, of course, with the assistance of local Sikhs, who had begun to arrive there from the adjoining districts, saved the situation from growing worse. Jhabbar had been sending a daily report to Amritsar on the situation. By this time, the Chief Khalsa Diwan dignitaries, such as Sir Sunder Singh Majithia, Sardar Harbans Singh Attari and others were working in complete co-operation with the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. It so happened that on the day when Chaudhary Sultan Ahmad, the local Deputy Commissioner, accompanied by the British Superintendent of Police, arrived at the scene to see the situation, Jhabbar received two telegrams, one from Sir Majithia, and the other from Sardar Harbans Singh Attari, asking him if he required more volunteers or funds, and that in case any officer came at the spot, the telegrams be shown to them. On perusal of the telegraphic message, the Deputy Commissioner ordered the arrest of the deceased mahant's brother and warned the Hindus against entry in the gurdwara. Earlier, when the Superintendent of Police enquired from Jhabbar with whose authority he had taken possession of the shrine, he replied that the shrine being Sikhs' religious heritage, he needed no authority from any quarters to occupy it. Now that the local officers had settled the affair in favour of the Sikhs, a grand congregation was summoned at Panja Sahib. Sikhs from all over the western Punjab, North West Frontier Province and some leaders from Amritsar attended. A management committee for the gurdwara was selected from among them. While Jhabbar with his jatha and the Sikh leaders returned to Amritsar, Jathedar

Bhuchar with another jatha returned after taking over control of Bhai Joga Singh Gurdwara at Peshawar as well.

#### AKALI JATHA KHARA SAUDA, BAR

Keeping in view the future Panthic requirements of the area, a Sikh congregation was held at Gurdwara Maharani Nikain, Sheikhpura, on December 24, 1920 and an Akali jatha, Khara Sauda, Bar, was formed and Jhabbar unanimously appointed its President.

On December 26, 1920, Jhabbar entered Gurdwara Sacha Sauda with his jatha. They summoned the mahant, and brought home to him the non-Sikh maryada in the shrine, his personal vices and immoral acts, which he confessed. Thereafter, they assumed control of the gurdwara and provided maintenance for his family out of the gurdwara funds.

#### GURDWARA TARN TARAN

On January 26, 1921, a deputation of Sikhs came to a diwan at Akal Takht, and related woeful tales of immorality and non-Sikh rituals performed in the gurdwara at Tarn Taran. At the end, they made a pathetic appeal that they be saved by the Khalsa from that wretched situation like the Brahmin, whose wife had been snatched away by the Pathan ruler of Kasur in 1760. Such was the magic effect of their appeal that the sangat performed Ardas, and resolved to take over control of the gurdwara. Soon, when members of SGPC, who were holding a meeting, learnt about this, they felt unhappy over the hasty action and even discussed whether it should be allowed or not. But, Jhabbar and Jathedar Bhuchar pleaded that since Ardas had been performed at Akal Takht and the facts as related were true, there should be no going back on the Ardas. Thus, a one hundred strong jatha, including the 22 veterans of Jhabbar, entered Gurdwara Tarn Taran before sunrise and listened to the Asa-di-Var kirtan. After the Ardas, a mahant addressed the sangat saying that they were not mere Udasi sadhus, but had taken Khande da Amrit. The moment jatha interfered with their arrangements, they would give a befitting answer. In reply, Jhabbar said that they had not come to take control of the Shrine, but to restore Sikh maryada and to stop immoral acts of the mahants, for, in law, the possession had already been handed over to them by the Government since the day of their control over the shrines at Amritsar.

Bhai Mohan Singh Vaid and other local Sikh respectable summoned some of the level headed mahants, and brought home to them the legal position of Gurdwara Control and advised compromise. The mahants agreed and a meeting was fixed for 2 p.m., in which a settlement was arrived at and put on record. But under its facade, the mahants sent for their helpers and paid hooligans of the area. News had already spread in the illaqa about this situation. Mahant's supporters as well as about seven thousand devoted Sikhs reached Tarn Taran by the evening. After the Rahras Ardas, a mahant sitting in tabeh of Guru Granth Sahib, was removed physically and a member of the jatha was installed there. Both sides had already taken strategic positions inside and outside the shrine. Instantly, there was violent confrontation. The mahants and their helpers were heavily drunk and the latter were mere mercenaries. They could not stand the

determined blows of the crusaders and started running away, but still they were able to inflict serious wounds on the members of the jatha, resulting in two deaths and injuries to several others. Thus, with the martyrdom of Bhai Hukam Singh and Bhai Hazara Singh, control of this historic gurdwara, built by Guru Arjun himself, was assumed by the Panth.

#### GURDWARA GURU-KA-BAGH

After listening to the similar wailings of a deputation from the Guru Ka Bagh area, as of the sangat from Tarn Taran, Jhabbar, in consultation with his jatha, declared that control of the shrine would be assumed by the Panth. This gurdwara is barely ten miles away from Amritsar, and was built in memory of the visit of the fifth and ninth Gurus. The decision thrilled the people of the locality. Jhabbar, with his fifty men strong jatha, reached there on the afternoon of January 31, 1921. A huge gathering had already assembled there. A diwan was held in which Jhabbar, after a spirited speech in favour of Gurdwara Reforms invited opinion from the sangat. Speaker after speaker repeated what had been told earlier by their representatives. It was decided that the jatha would stay for the night inside the gurdwara premises after turning out every inmate except the mahant, and another diwan would be held on the next morning. If a consensus was arrived at to remove the mahant, control of the gurdwara would be taken.

During the night, the mahant had arranged to send for his sympathisers, including the highly respected S. Amar Singh Jhabal, who along with his two brothers was deeply involved in the Gurdwara Reform Movement and was an outstanding nationalist. During the next morning diwan, S. Amar Singh suggested that in case the mahant undertook to follow the Panthic instructions regarding management of the shrine, he may be allowed to continue. Jhabbar replied that once he must be dispossessed. If he could bring hukamnama from Akal Takht for his restoration, it would be obeyed. S. Amar Singh thought that procedure was time consuming and brought a written statement by the mahant that he had handed over control of the shrine to the 78 Abstracts of Sikh Studies SGPC, and that he undertook to follow their instructions in future. Jhabbar reiterated that, in law, the statement had no value, for, the mahant continued in his possession and also because the document was not on a properly stamped paper. S. Amar Singh lost his cool and said that Jhabbar was paying no heed to the local opinion of even those who were equally anxious for reforms in the gurdwaras. At this, Jhabbar relented and said that though S. Amar Singh was wrong, he would not insist further for turning out the mahant. He again addressed the congregation and stressed the need for vigilance over the mahant functioning in the shrine in future, and prayed that Satguru help him (mahant) give up his past vices. A local committee for general control of the shrine was constituted. After three days, Jhabbar and his jatha returned to Amritsar and placed the mahants written statement on the records of the

On return to his headquarters, Jhabbar took control of three more gurdwaras, all in Sheikhpur district, namely Ker Bawa Kirpa Ram, Machhi Ke and Gurdwara Mai Nikain (Sheikhpur) on February 10, 11, and 12, 1921, respectively.

## GURDWARA NANKANA SAHIB (JANAM ASTHAN)

The Nankana Sahib massacre and its different facets, the darkest episode of the Gurdwara Reform Movement, have been variously reported, and apart from being sketchy, they leave gaps in the narration. For instance, a confidential report dated February 22, 1922, by the Government of Punjab for information of the Government of India and Secretary of State, London, recorded, "The seizure of Nankana Gurdwara by an Akali jatha on February 20, 1921, and the massacre of the Sikhs in retaliation by the mahant and his followers added fuel to the fire of Sikh discontent". Khushwant Singh wrote, "The news of the outrage spread like wild fire. Bands of Akalis from distant towns began to converge on Nankana. The commissioner of Lahore hurried to the scene and, with great alacrity, handed over the keys of the shrine to a representative of the SGPC". Ruchi Ram Sahni said, "The jatha on its way to an Akali conference near Nankana, went to the gurdwara for homage. They were listening to the Asa-di-Var kirtan when the goondas of the mahant pounced upon them". Shamsheer Singh Ashok's account of this incident, though nearer the truth, leaves important gaps in relating the heart-rending tale. As such, it becomes necessary that the course of this gory episode be told in some detail, in the light of authentic material as contained in 'Jethedar Kartar Singh Jhabbar', by Bhai Narain Singh, based on the daily diaries of the Jathedar himself, the principal actor in this ghastly scene and a valiant crusader of the Gurdwara Reform Movement. Dr Ganda Singh records, "With the publication of this book, new material has come to light without which there would have been many gaps in the Sikh history of this period".

For the seventy two years of British Raj (1849-1921), all Sikh shrines remained in possession of mahants and pujaris under a well planned scheme of the British Government as explained in the foregoing paragraphs. Gurdwara Nankana Sahib had the largest landed estate (18,900 acres) granted by Maharaja Ranjit Singh Being the birth place of Guru Nanak, it was of great veneration for the Sikhs. The anti-Sikh maryada rituals, coupled with scenes of immorality of the mahants and pujaris for the past three generations, particularly, the wicked doings of the then mahant and the misuse of its vast resources, were greatly exercising the minds of the Sikhs, and causing extreme unrest. The handing over of control of Golden Temple and Akal Takht by the Government to the Sikhs made no effect on Mahant Narain Dass of this shrine. Instead, he employed hooligans and even Pathans in large numbers, provided them with weapons including fire arms, strengthened the defence arrangements of the gurdwara and took other precautions to safeguard his control over the shrine. It was only natural that Sikhs during this movement should also assume control of this famous shrine. But, an incident hastened its course. A Session Judge from Sindh, on retirement, came to Punjab with 30 of his family members to pay homage to the gurdwaras in Punjab. They reached Nankana Sahib first of all. They were provided accommodation in the shrine. In the evening, a fourteen years old girl was forcibly snatched away from the family by the goondas of the mahant. The family fearing further mischief, immediately went out of the gurdwara. They passed the wintry night under trees in great distress. In the early hours of next morning, they received the message that in case the family quietly

reached the railway station, the girl would be restored to them. The unfortunate pilgrims complied. Completely demoralized and broken in spirits, the family returned home.

## PANTHIC DECISION TO ASSUME CONTROL OF GURDWARAS

Jhabbar's headquarters at Gurdwara Khara Sauda, Chuhar Kana, being only twenty miles away from Nankana Sahib, he soon learnt about this incident. He hurriedly reached Amritsar, explained the latest act of rascality of the mahant, and asked for permission of the SGPC, of which he was an important member himself, and which was already in session, to resume control of the shrine urgently. Although, it was well-known how the mahant had fortified himself inside the shrine, Jhabbar begged that he needed neither funds nor volunteers. S. Nihal Singh, a sitting Judge of Patiala High Court, suggested that the entire Panth should be allowed to take part in that crusade. After considering pros and cons of the matter, it was resolved that a Panthic congregation be summoned at Nankana Sahib for March 4-6, 1921.

Wide publicity for this Sikh congregation at Nankana Sahib put the mahant on red alert. He adopted a two-fold policy of feigned compromise and confrontation. He sent his emissary to Jhabbar and asked for compromise. In a meeting between them, the mahant promised to hand over control of the shrine to the Panth. Jhabbar got a sub-committee for compromise appointed by the SGPC to finalize the matter in consultation with the mahant. About half a dozen different dates were fixed by Jhabbar for a preliminary meeting between them, but after a day long wait) the mahant would send word, asking for another date at a different place.

## MAHANT NARAIN DASS'S MACHINATIONS

Jhabbar, on his part, had deployed two of his confidants, Bhai Waryam Singh and Bhai Avtar Singh to watch and report every activity of the mahant. While the former lived in the garb of an Udasi sadhu in Gurdwara Janam Asthan managed by mahant Narain Das, the latter had earned such confidence of the mahant that he always accompanied him and even attended his top secret meetings as well. They sent regular reports and verbal messages to Jhabbar and kept him abreast of the future shape of things. They informed how the mahant had summoned five hundred Udasi sadhus from Muktsar for his protection, and that when they learnt that the Akalis might sometime occupy the shrine, the sadhus asked the mahant to transfer the proprietary rights of the shrine to their organization, and that on the latter's refusal, the Udasis had left the place in disgust. Thereafter, at the instance of Mahant Narain Dass, a meeting of prominent Hindus was called at Lala Lajpat Rai's residence at Lahore, and a Trust for management of the shrine was proposed to be formed. The mahant donated Rs. 3,000/- for Lala's Paper, Bande Matram. The Lala, being a distinguished Arya Samajist and an all India level Congress Leader, suggested eminent persons for the Trust. The mahant enquired that since all the proposed Trustees were from Lahore, who would handle the Akalis if they attempted to take control of the shrine. He was told that fight with the Akalis was none of the Trustee's job. At this, the mahant was greatly disappointed and came back. Jhabbar was also informed that Mahant Narain Dass and several

others in possession of Sikh gurdwaras had jointly paid Rupees 50,000/- to Mr. King, Commissioner, Lahore, so that they be protected in their present position as mahants. The Commissioner issued a general circular that the mahants could be provided police guards on payment of certain amount, and that they might also seek court's injunctions against their being forcibly dispossessed. When consulted, Sardar Bahadur Mehtab Singh, then Government Advocate, advised Jhabbar to urgently assume control of all the seven gurdwaras at Nankana Sahib, for it was likely that Jhabbar might soon be arrested and the progress of Gurdwara Reforms be thus stalled. Jhabbar was further informed that the mahant had secured the services of twelve absconding murderers of Majha area on payment of Rs. 1,50,000/- for the murder of Sikh leaders, Sardar Harbans Singh Attari, Professor Bhai Jodh Singh, S. Teja Singh Samundari, S. Teja Singh Bhuchar, then jothedar, Akal Takht, and Jhabbar, with whom the mahant would be holding a compromise meeting in a specially arranged room during March 4-6 congregation at Nankana Sahib. It was also reported to Jhabbar that a Sanatan Sikh Conference along with mahants, in possession of all the Sikh shrines, had been summoned at Lahore for February 19-20, where it was proposed to form an organization to forestall forcible takeover of the gurdwaras by the Panth.

#### JHABBAR'S JATHA

Jhabbar explained the mahants' machinations in detail to his jatha. It was decided that the control of Gurdwara Janam Asthan be assumed on February 20, when the mahant would be away to the conference at Lahore and that a 5,000 strong jatha be formed from the local area, and that the matter be treated as top secret, particularly members of the SGPC should in no case come to know of this. Bhai Lachhman Singh, Bhai Tehal Singh, Bhai Buta Singh and Sant Teja Singh were summoned from Lyallpur district, for they always insisted that they must take part in this crusade.

The final programme for execution of this plan was that the jathas from Lyallpur district should assemble at a particular place, twelve miles behind Nankana Sahib, around 10 p.m. on the night of February 19. They should travel during the night and meet Jhabbar's jatha near Nankana Sahib at a fixed place in the small hours of February 20.

#### PANTHIC LEADERS DECIDE TO INTERVENE

Jhabbar received a telegram from Amritsar that S. Teja Singh Samundri and Master Tara Singh would be travelling by train and that Jhabbar should meet them at railway station, Chuhar Kana, on early morning of February 19. Jhabbar's horse-sense convinced him that the top leaders had come to know of their new plan of action and were coming to dissuade them from executing it. So, instead of meeting the leaders himself, he sent to the railway station one of his confidants. Jhabbar's guess for the leaders' visit proved right. By mid-day of February 19, about 3,000 members of Jhabbar's jatha had reached Gurdwara Khara Sauda, when two emissaries of SGPC, Bhai Dalip Singh, martyr of Nankana Sahib massacre, and S. Jaswant Singh Jhabal reached

Gurdwara Khara Sauda, and conveyed the Panthic hukam NOT to execute the programme fixed for February 20.

Jhabbar explained to the emissaries in minutest detail every plan made by the mahant under the garb of compromise to retain his possession of the gurdwara. He particularly emphasized the mahant's murderous gang.