

LIBERATION OF GURDWARAS

Written by Dr. Devinder Singh Sekhon PhD
Tuesday, 11 February 2014 16:35

LIBERATION OF THE HISTORICAL GURDWARAS

The Sikh history is replete with supreme sacrifices and martyrdoms. There is hardly a day in the calendar on which some Sikh did not make some sacrifice. So, although each and every month has its share of sacrifices, the month of February has its own importance in terms of sacrifices because hundreds of Sikhs were butchered in a barbaric way for their peaceful agitation to liberate the Nankana Sahib Gurdwara from a highly immoral Mahant who was using the holy premises of the historical Gurdwara for all sorts of immoral activities.

After the annexation of Punjab in 1849, the British Government handed the charge of the historical Gurdwaras to Mahants and the Udasis (sects which pretend to preach Sikhism) with managers appointed by the government in some cases. The most important Gurdwaras included Nankana Sahib - the birth place of Guru Nanak Sahib - Gurdwara Punja Sahib, Taran Taran Sahib, Guru Ka Bagh near Amritsar, and the Gurdwaras in Anandpur Sahib. These Gurdwaras - especially Nankana Sahib - had huge properties attached to them which were donated by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. These properties generated lots of revenue. Initially, the Mahants ran the administration of the Gurdwaras honestly and efficiently. They preached the noble Principles of Guru Granth Sahib with dedication; but as the time passed by they became highly greedy and immoral. They began to follow the non-Sikh rituals and customs strictly prohibited by Guru Sahiban. Idols of the Hindu gods were installed in the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) complex where they were worshipped according to Hindu rituals. Also, the administrator of Harmandir Sahib invited the then Governor of Punjab, Michael 'O Dwyre to Darbar Sahib and honoured him despite the fact that the Governor had supported General Dyer who had massacred more than 1300 innocent people who had gathered at the Jallianwala Bagh on April 13, 1919. Not only that, the Mahants had also begun to use the holy buildings of the Gurdwaras as their personal properties, and began to carry out vile activities like inviting dancing girls, serving liquor, and smoking on the premises. Such nefarious activities on the part of the Mahants caused a great resentment among the Sikhs. Some Sikhs organized themselves into small jathas (groups or squads) to take control of the Gurdwaras using peaceful means wherever possible. One such jatha headed by Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabbar was able to oust the Mahant from Gurdwara Punja Sahib near Rawalpindi and take its control.

There were some other unacceptable happenings which infuriated the Sikhs and prompted them to take some action quickly. For example Sikhs of lower classes were allowed in

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Harmandir Sahib only between certain hours. That was in complete violation of the Teachings of Guru Granth Sahib.

FORMATION OF SGPC

On Oct 12, 1920 a Sikh jatha, mostly from lower-classes Sikhs, was not allowed to enter Harmandir Sahib to offer karah pershad (sweet pudding) and to offer prayers. However, the Jatha was later allowed to enter when a Sikh read a holy Shabad which clearly did not allow discrimination of any sort. The congregation then proceeded directly to Akal Takhat Sahib to pay respects. On seeing a big congregation coming towards Akal Takhat, the priests fled in fear and the Sikhs were able to take control of Harmandir Sahib. The Jatha appointed Bhai Teja Singh Bhuchchar as the Jathedar (leader) of Akal Takhat and 25 volunteers offered to guard the Premises.

With this success, the Sikhs became more determined to manage their own affairs and decided to organize themselves so as to launch a peaceful movement to take the control of the Gurdwaras from the immoral Mahants and to restore the sanctity of the Shrines. A big gathering including the top Sikh leaders was called at Harmandir Sahib, Amritsar on Nov 15, 1920. They elected a 175-member committee and named it (Sharomani) Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee or SGPC for short. S. Sundar Singh Majithia was elected the first president (who was replaced by Baba Kharak Singh in early 1921), S. Harbans Singh Attari as the vice-president and S. Sundar Singh Ramgarhia as secretary. They also created a task force wing – Akali Dal - of SGPC to organize struggle for liberating the major historic Gurdwaras.

LIBERATION OF GURDWARA SAHIB TARN-TARAN

On Jan 21, 1921, Bhai Sant Singh went to Darbar Sahib Tarn-Tarn along with his wife, daughter, and his son to pay obeisance. Some supporters of the Mahant there began to molest the 13-year old daughter of Bhai Sant Singh. When he objected, they beat him viciously, and tied a stone to the neck of his 10-year old son and threw him in the holy Sarovar (tank) thereby killing him. Mrs Bhai Sant Singh appeared before the SGPC on Jan 24 and narrated her woeful story. The Committee decided quickly to oust the evil Mahant and take control of the Gurdwara.

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Bhai Teja Singh Bhuchar decided to go to Tarn-Taran himself with a jatha of 40 Sikhs. They arrived at the Gurdwara in early morning on Jan 25, 1921. Another Jatha led by Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabbar also reached there later. As per the Principles of the SGPC, everything was to be dealt peacefully. A meeting was held between the Sikh Jathas and the management at 4:00 pm. The Jathedars laid down five conditions if the Mahant wanted to continue serving the Gurdwara. At 8:30 pm when it was dark, some agents of the Mahant came to the Singhs and told them that the Mahant had agreed to accept the conditions and invited the leaders to go inside the holy Temple to sign the deal. When the Singhs were inside, and were kneeling before Guru Granth Sahib, Mahant's goons began to attack the unarmed Singhs with swords, axes and clubs while the Singhs remained perfectly calm. Bhai Hazara Singh of Aladin (dist Amritsar) and Bhai Hukam Singh of Kot Wasaoo (dist Gurdaspur) who had knelt down before Guru Granth Sahib were martyred while 17 more Singhs were seriously wounded. They were the first martyrs of the movement to liberate the Gurdwaras.

Hearing this tragedy and the barbaric behaviour of the Mahant, more Sikh jathas arrived at the Gurdwara. Next day, police and Government officials also arrived at the scene, and noting that the situation could get out of control, the Government officials were under pressure to give the control of Gurdwara Sahib to the Sikhs. So, grudgingly, the Mahant handed over the keys to the Sikhs.

On Jan 28, 1921, at the bhog ceremony of Bhai Hazara Singh at Aladin, Bhai Lachhman Singh Dharowali offered the prayers, and made this request to Guru Granth Sahib, "oh my Perfect Guru! Bhai Hazara Singh has laid down his young life for a noble cause, please, provide me with a similar opportunity so that I may also lay down my life for a similar cause. As you, will read next, 24 days later, Bhai Lachhman Singh laid down his life while fighting peacefully to liberate Gurdwara Nankana Sahib.

LIBERATION OF GURDWARA NANKANA SAHIB

Being the birth place of Guru Nanak Sahib, the founder of Sikhism, Gurdwara Nankana Sahib is the holiest of all the Gurdwaras. It was also the richest of all as it owned 17000 acres of land which was donated by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The Mahant of the holy Gurdwara, Narain Dass, had a strong backing of the Government. Because of that, He had been able to transfer a big chunk of this land in his own name as his personal property. Because of the backing of the Government and because of his riches, he was very powerful. Consequently, it was very difficult to oust him. He had hired a number of goons to protect him. If that were all, the SGPC might have allowed him to continue to manage the affairs of the holy Shrine. But he was carrying out highly objectionable activities on the premises of the Gurdwara. Liquor was

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regularly served there, and thinly clad young women performed dances. Smoking huqas (big smoking pipes) and the use of some other intoxicants was also prevalent there. The Sikhs could not allow this kind of sacrilege of Guru Nanak Sahib's birth place, so they had to put an end to all such nefarious activities. A meeting of the top Akali leaders including Master Tara Singh, S. Harbans Singh Attari, and S. Teja Singh Samundari etc. was held in Lyallpur (now Faisalabad) on Jan 29, 1921 at which it was decided that a Khalsa Congregation be held at Nankana Sahib on March 4, 5, and 6 and the control of the holy Shrine be taken away from the Mahant.

After the takeover of Harmandir Sahib and Gurdwara Tarn-Taran Sahib, the Mahant began to suspect a possible attempt by the Akalis to takeover Gurdwara Nankana Sahib. So, he had become very vigilant. Now his fears were confirmed by this plan of the Akalis. As a result, Mahant Narain Dass began preparations to thwart such efforts on the part of the Akali Dal and he began to amass all sorts of lethal weapons and hired 25 Pathans to fight for him. His plan was to let the Akalis come to the Gurdwara where all of them would be killed. However, a few days later the Akali leaders came to know of Mahant's sinister plan through their spies. The Akalis planned to surprise the Mahant by holding the Congregation 10-12 days before the planned dates. A meeting was held on Feb 17, 1921 at Gurdwara Sacha Sauda in Chuharkana (a town near Nankana Sahib where Guru Nanak Sahib's father Mehta Kalyan Chand Ji had sent Him for some profitable business. But rather than investing in some business, Guru Sahib spent all the money feeding hungry Sadhus who had not eaten for days) which among others was attended by Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabbar, Bhai Lachhman Singh Dharowali, Bhai Tehal Singh Dhanju, and Bhai Buta Singh Lyallpuri. It was decided at the Meeting that a perfectly peaceful Sacrificial Jatha be sent to Nankana Sahib before the sun rise on Feb 20, 1921 to take control of the holy Shrine and to oust the Mahant. The plan called for Bhai Buta Singh to reach Nankana Sahib directly on the night of Feb 19 while two jathas under the leaderships of Bhai Lachhman Singh and Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabbar be sent to Nankana Sahib separately. The two Jathas were to meet at the canal falls of Chander Kot on the evening of the 19th from where they would proceed as a single Jatha to reach the Gurdwara Sahib on the morning of the 20th

A Jatha of about 150 Sikhs eager to lay down their lives reached the Chander Kot Falls under the leadership of Bhai Lachhman Singh Dharowali late in the evening of the 19th. Bhai Tehal Singh Dhanju was another important member of this Jatha. The Jatha began to wait for the Jatha of Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabbar.

When the top Akali leadership including Master Tara Singh and S. Teja Singh Samundari learned about the plans of the Sacha Sauda Meet, they called an emergency meeting in Lyallpur on Feb 19, 1921. After long deliberations, it was decided that it was much too risky to lead a congregation to the Gurdwara on the 20th of Feb as planned by Bhai Dharowali and Bhai

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Kartar Singh Jhabbar because according to a secret report, the Mahant had come to know about this recent plan and was determined to kill all the members of the Jatha. The decision was unanimous, but stopping the two Jathas from proceeding to Nankana Sahib was a big task because of the severe shortage of time. Bhai Dalip Singh Sangla was also present at the Meeting. He took upon himself to inform the two Jathedars – Bhai Lachhman Singh Dharowali and Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabbar – of the decision of the High Command and to stop them. Bhai Dalip Singh hurried towards Nankana Sahib to meet with the Jathedars. He was able to reach S. Kartar Singh Jhabbar just in time and was able to convince him not to proceed. However, despite his best efforts for several hours, he was unable to trace Bhai Lachhman Singh. Having been unable to reach Bhai Lachhman Singh, Bhai Dalip Singh proceeded to Nankana Sahib. He went to Bhai Uttam Singh to take some rest, and asked Chaudhary Pal Singh to wait outside the Gurdwara to meet with Bhai Lachhman Singh Dharowali and to deliver him the message of the Akali Brass.

In the meantime, when S. Kartar Singh Jhabbar did not join Bhai Lachhman Singh's Jatha at Chander Kot, Bhai Tehal Singh urged Bhai Lachhman Singh to proceed without waiting more for Bhai Kartar Singh. Bhai Tehal Singh offered their traditional prayer and sought Guru's blessings to be successful in their mission. He vowed to the Guru that either the Sikhs would be successful in liberating the holy Gurdwara of Guru Nanak Sahib or they will lay down their lives peacefully and will not return alive. Having said the prayers, the Jatha marched towards Nankana Sahib chanting the holy Shabads all the way. They reached the outskirts of Nankana Sahib early in the morning on the 20th of Feb 1921 when Chaudhry Pal Singh approached them. He conveyed Bhai Dalip Singh's message to Bhai Lachhman Singh requesting him not to proceed. However, Bhai Tehal Singh refused to agree because the Jatha had vowed to the Guru not to return alive without their mission unaccomplished. Chaudhary Pal Singh tried to stop Bhai Lachhman Singh by grabbing his waist, but Bhai Lachhman was too strong for the Chaudhary. Bhai Lachhman Singh freed himself just with one jerk, and proceeded toward the Gurdwara raising the traditional slogans: Bolle So Nihal Sat Sri Akal.

The Jatha reached the premises of the Gurdwara at about six o' clock with unstoppable zeal and dedication. Before entering the Gurdwara, Bhai Lachhman Singh addressed the Jatha one last time. He told the Sikhs that only those people should enter the holy Gurdwara who had no attachment with their lives and were willing to die without any resistance or retaliation. He warned the Khalsa that the movement to liberate must be non-violent. Everybody accepted the challenge by raising Slogans which reached the sky. The Mahant had left the main entrance gate, and the gate to the Gurdwara Sahib open on purpose. The Sikhs entered the Gurdwara where Guru Granth Sahib had been laid down on a small hard bed on a platform. Bhai Lachhman Singh respectfully opened Guru Granth Sahib and began to read. The rest of the Khalsa settled on the carpets on the floor to listen to the holy Message as read out aloud by Bhai Lachhman Singh. The opening Shabad (the page at which Guru Granth Sahib was found to be open later, was as follows):

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ੴ ਸਤਿਨਾਮੁ ॥ 5 ਭਉ (578) ॥ ਸਲੋਕ: ਜੋ ਲੋੜੀਏ ਰਾਮ ਸੇਵਕ ਸੇਈ ਕਾਢਿਆ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਜਾਣੇ ਸਤੀ ਸਾਈ ਸੰਤ ਨ ਬਾਹਰਾ ॥ ੴ ਮਲਿਕ ਜ

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ਖਟਾਨਾ
ਰਾਮੁ ਸੰਗੀ
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ਰਾਮੁ
ਸਮਾਇ
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Meaning: Sloak: Only those individuals deserve to be called real devotees whom Waheguru loves, oh Nanak! Oh my friend! Realize this truth that Waheguru is not separate from His true devotees.

Chhant: Just as one body of water mixes completely with another and the two are indistinguishable, the soul of a devotee mixes completely with Waheguru and becomes one. Once that happens, the devotee realizes that it is Waheguru everywhere, and his mind is in complete harmony with Waheguru. Then the devotee sings the praise of Waheguru only. The devotee also realizes that even though Waheguru is invisible, He is everywhere, but, completely unaffected by Maya. The devotee has dispelled all sorts of misgivings, fears and the three known effects of Maya. He has become one with Waheguru just as two bodies of water mix completely with each other.

As Bhai Lachhman Singh was reciting this holy Shabad melodiously, the whole Congregation was listening with devotion. Suddenly bullets began to rain on the congregation. The hired goons of the Mahant had made holes in the walls at strategic points just for this purpose. Even though bullets were raining on the Congregation, nobody moved at all. One or two bullets hit Bhai Lachhman Singh and at least one bullet pierced the holy Guru Granth Sahib (the bullet-pierced Bir of Guru Granth Sahib is displayed to the public every year on the anniversary day). Many Sikhs were killed and others wounded. When the Mahant realized that there was nobody among the Khalsa who could pose any threat, he sent the goons inside the Gurdwara to kill all of the Khalsa with swords, axes and clubs.

He had already made arrangements to cremate the dead bodies and a big pile of firewood was ready to set on fire when needed. The goons got the fire going and all the dead and wounded (some of them still alive) Sikhs were tossed into the fire.

As mentioned earlier, Bhai Dalip Singh Sangla and Bhai Waryam Singh were resting at Bhai Uttam Singh's shop. They both ran towards the Gurdwara when they heard gun-shots. The Mahant wounded Bhai Dalip Singh with his pistol while Bhai Waryam Singh was cut into pieces by the goons. Bhai Lachhman Singh was still alive. The Mahant ordered that Bhai Lachhman Singh and Bhai Dalip Singh be tied to a Jund tree (it is a huge tree with thick branches but has no leaves. It rather has long wire-like thin shoots) in the compound and burned alive. The goons did just that. **This was a rare example of a supreme sacrifice of such a scale in which 126 Sikhs, as per the Government report, (some sources put the figure close to 200) laid down their lives peacefully to liberate the birth place of their revered Guru Nanak from**

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the evil Mahant.

The news of the atrocities of the Mahant causing such a huge tragedy spread like a wildfire far and near. Around 9:00 am Bhai Uttam Singh went to the railway station and requested the station master S. Karam Singh to send telegrams to the Governor of Punjab, the Deputy Commissioner of district Sheikhpura, the Commissioner and the Superintendent Police informing them of the massacre. The Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Curry, reached the Gurdwara in the early afternoon, while the Commissioner, Mr. King reached late in the evening. They arrested 20 Pathans and locked the Gurdwara and called in the Army to maintain control.

Along with 2200 armed Sikhs, Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabbar arrived at the Gurdwara early on the morning of 21st Feb, 1921. They were shocked to see the atrocities of the Mahant. Bhai Kartar Singh told the Commissioner that they were there to take control of the Gurdwara, and demanded the keys. Mr. King refused to do so and threatened the Jatha with dire consequences if they entered the Gurdwara. But Bhai Kartar Singh was in no mood to care about the threats. He told the Commissioner in no uncertain terms that he could do whatever he wanted to do as the Sikhs were ready to lay down their lives, but they would not accept anything less than the complete control of the sacred Gurdwara. Assessing the unwavering determination of the Khalsa, the Commissioner handed over the control of the Gurdwara to the Khalsa late in the evening.

As the Khalsa entered the Gurdwara, they found blood on the floor everywhere and also some remaining body pieces of the Martyrs. They also found many charred and unburnt bodies of the Martyrs on the pyre. Next day, on Feb 22, many important Sikh Leaders reached Nankana Sahib and saw the tragic massacre with their own eyes. Under their pressure the Government Officials were forced to arrest the Mahant to be tried for the atrocities. The Khalsa also cremated all the bodies on Feb 22 with full respects and according to the Sikh Rites.

The Mahant and 9 Pathans were given death sentence, but the Supreme Court commuted the death sentence of the Mahant into life in prison. Only a few Pathans were hanged.

This is a story of the tradition of the brave Sikhs who sacrificed their lives peacefully to re-establish the sanctity of our holy Gurdwaras. Let us never forget their supreme sacrifices and learn some lessons.

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We salute our heroes.

Waheguru Ji ka Khalsa Waheguru Ji ki Fateh