

A QUESTION AT JAITO MORCHA AND SAKA NANKANA SAHIB

By

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JAITO MORCHA is Akali agitation for the restoration of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha, Punjab to his throne who was forced to abdicate in favour of his minor son, Partap Singh on 9 July 1923. Although the British pronounced his abdication to be voluntary, the Akalis condemned it as an act of high handedness on the part of the government. The committee set up to have the Maharaja restored to the throne announced 29 July 1923 to be observed in the Punjab as a day of prayer. On 2 August 1923, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee sent a telegram to Lord Reading, the Viceroy of India, challenging the official version, and seeking an independent enquiry. Three days later, it passed a resolution to carry on a peaceful campaign. On 25 August, following a public march a *divan* was held at Jaito, in Nabha, and resolutions were adopted expressing sympathy with the Maharaja and condemning government action. On 27 August, organizers were arrested by Nabha state authorities. The *divan* was originally scheduled to conclude on 27 August. Arrests made by police provoked the Akalis to continue it indefinitely and to start a series of akhand paths of the Guru Granth Sahib. On 14 September 1923, police replaced *granthi* doing path at akhand path by their own *granthi*, Atma Singh. This created a great commotion among the Sikhs. On 29 September the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee condemned this action. It simultaneously declared its determination to have the Sikhs right to free worship reaffirmed. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and the Shiromani Akali Dal were declared as unlawful associations and all the 60 members of the interim committee were arrested on charges of treason against the King. The Shiromani Committee started sending a *jatha* of twenty-five Singhs daily from Amritsar from the 15th September. Before the departure of the *jatha*, the Singhs were asked to take the pledge. "My aim is to restart the interrupted 'Akhand Path' in Gurdwara Gangsar and to keep it going in the Gurdwara independently and collectively in the form of congregation according to Sikh tradition. *If in doing so, I have to face hardship and trouble at the hands of the Government official I shall bear all very politely and without lifting my hand to strike.*" Akali *jathas* were stopped on entering Nabha territory, taken into custody and beaten by police. They were then left off in distant deserts without food or water. To intensify the agitation, the Akalis increased the size of the *jatha*. On 9 February 1924, 500 Shahidi Akali *jatha* marched from the Akal Takht, receiving unprecedented welcome in villages and towns through which they passed.

S. Zimand, a New York Times correspondent who witnessed the *jathas* on the march, observed: "The *Jatha* was moving in perfect order and nonviolence with large crowds of public on its right and left, five Nishan Sahibs in the front and Guru Granth in the middle." On 20 February 1924, the *jatha* reached Bargari, a village on Nabha Faridkot border, barely 10 km from Jaito. At Jaito, about 150 metres from Gurdwara Tibbi Sahib, stood the Nabha administrator, Wilson Johnston, with a large force of state constabulary. On 21 February, the *jatha* marched on towards the Gurdwara, refusing to stop or disperse as demanded by Wilson Johnston. The administrator ordered the army to open fire, in two volleys of fire lasting about five minutes, several fell dead. The official estimate of the casualties was 19 dead and 29 injured. The Akali figures were much higher. The firing on the peaceful *jatha* of Akalis caused resentment throughout the country.

On 28 February 1924, another 500 strong *Shahldi jatha* left Amritsar for Jaito where it was taken into custody on 14 March. Thirteen more 500 strong *jalhas* reached Jaito and courted arrest.

Sikh *jathas* also came from Canada, Hong Kong and Shanghai to join the campaign. The Governor of the Punjab, Sir Malcolm Hailey, tried the policy of creating a schism in the community by having parallel Sikh Sudhar Committees representing moderate and pro-government sections. A 101strong *jatha* was allowed to perform an akhand path at Jaito. But this did not conciliate the general Sikh opinion, nor did it affect the tempo of the agitation.

On the issue of the Akalls being allowed to perform an akhand path at Jaito, the government was prepared to start negotiations through Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya and Bhai Jodh Singh, but it was adamant on the question of making restitution to the deposed Maharaja of his state. In the meantime, the Punjab Government introduced in the Legislative Council the Sikh Gurdwaras Bill which was unanimously passed on 7 July 1925. After the bill was passed, Sir Malcolm Hailey, Governor of the Punjab, announced during his speech in the Punjab Legislative Council that the Administrator of Nabha would permit the bands of pilgrims to proceed for religious worship to Gurdwara Gangsar at Jaito. The announcement was followed by the release of most of the Akali prisoners arrested in the course of the restrictions on the performance of akhand path and the Akalis starting a series of 101 such recitations which was concluded on 6 August 1925.

Nankana Sahib Morcha: Gurdwara Nankana Sahib was managed by Mahant Narayan Das in early 20th century. This Gurdwara had a huge property of over 19000 acres (77 km²) of highly fertile land attached to it which yielded enormous income per year. The Mahant became corrupted. It is alleged that dance girls were brought to the Gurdwara and obscene songs were sung within the holy premises. In 1918, a retired A.A.C. officer paid visit to the Gurdwara with his 13-year-old daughter to offer prayers to the Guru. As the Rehraas was being read in the Gurdwara, a mahant was allegedly raping the minor girl in another room within the Gurdwara premises. When the father lodged a complaint with the Mahant to take action against the rapist, Mahant is said to have ignored his request. In the same year, six young female devotees from Jaranwal village the Gurdawara on Puranmashi to pay their offerings at Gurdwara and they too were similarly raped by the mahant in that gurdwara. All this sent shock waves across Punjab. In October 1920, a congregation was held at Dharowal in Sheikhpura for reform in Gurudwara Nankana Sahib. On January 24, Shiromani Committee held a general meeting and took decision to hold a Dewan in Nankana Sahib on March 4, 5 and 6 and advise Mahant to mend his ways.

On February 14, Mahant held a meeting with his associates to chalk out a plan to kill the opposing Sikh leaders. Mahant recruited 400 mercenaries, paid at twenty Indian rupees per month. With government's help, Mahant also collected arms and ammunition. He also arranged and stored fourteen tins of paraffin and further strengthened the Gurdwara gate and carved out shooting galleries.

The Shiromani Committee extended invitation to Mahant for talks at Gurdwara *Khara Sauda* to resolve the issue but he did not show up at the given time. Then he offered to hold talks with the Sikh leaders in Sheikhpura on February 15, 1921, but again he failed to show up. Third time he promised to meet the Shiromani Committee leaders at the residence of Sardar Amar Singh *Lyall Gazette* on February 16, but once again he failed to turn up.

The Shiromani Committee decided of its own to meet the Mahant on 3 March 1921 to advise him to hand over the charge to the committee. But the Committee got the information from its own intelligence that Mahant was planning to invite the Sikh leaders at Nanakana Sahib and have them killed from hired gundas. This greatly angered Kartar Singh Jhabber and others. A meeting of the Sikh leaders was called at Gurdwara Khara Sauda on 16, 1921 to chalk out the future course of action. It was decided that Sangat would go in *Jathas* and take charge of the Gurdwara. Sikh leaders learnt that Mahant was going to Lahore on 20 February 1921. Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabber and Bhai Lachaman Singh Dharowali decided to take their jathas to Nanakana Sahib on 20 February. They decided to take charge of Gurdwara in his absence as they had come to know of his wicked plan.

On the evening of February 19, 1921, Bhai Lachaman Singh Dharowali reached Nizam Deva Singhwala with his jatha of 8 Singhs (6 males and two females). At Nizam Deva Singh wala, Jathedar Tehal Singh had already arranged a Jatha of about 150 Singhs.

The combined Jatha took a Hukamnama and started for the Gurdwara at about 10 PM on that night so as to reach there by early morning. On the way 50 more Sikhs joined the *Shaheedi Jatha* and total number swelled to about 200. At Chanderkot Jhal, Jathedar Lachhman Singh decided to wait for Kartar Singh Jhabber and his Jatha. They waited for a while in vain and finally Jathedar Dharowali decided to cancel the plan for further march to Nankana Sahib. At that moment, Jathedar Tehal Singh came forward and addressed the Shaheedi Jatha that "*the prayers having already been said and the action plan having already been decided with Guru's word, it is now imperative for now to move forward. All the members shall keep cool even under extreme provocations*". The Shaheedi Jatha reached the Railway-crossing near Nankana Sahib in the morning with Jathedar Tehal Singh. Some of the Jatha members raced towards Darshani Deori to take possession of the Gurdawara, but at this very moment, Chaudhury Paul Singh Lyallpuri showed up with the latest decision of Shiromani Committee advising to postpone the action for taking possession of the Gurdwara. Once again, Jathedar Tehal Singh took the initiative and challenged the Shaheedi Jatha. He said: "*Khalsa ji, the time is not to stop now, but to act. We have come here to achieve martyrdom under Guru's word. This is very un-Sikh-like to backout from one's commitment at the last moment*" Saying this, Jathedar Tehal Singh walked with the Jatha towards the Gurdwara. Bhai Lachhman Singh and others repeatedly requested him to relent, but determined Bhai Tehal Singh stuck to his Ardas. The entire Shaheedi Jatha followed him. By this time, another horseman messenger, Bhai Ram Singh, arrived and tried to persuade Jathedar Tehal Singh and the Jatha to return. The Jatha soon entered *Darshni Deohri* of the Gurdwara and shut the main door from inside. While some of the devotees took their seats inside the *Prakash Asthan*, others sat on the platform and the *Baran dari*. Bhai Lachhman Singh Dharowali sat on Guru's *tabia*. Mahant Narayan Das came to know of the situation through the *Jaikaras* of the Shaheedi Jatha. At first, he was utterly shocked thinking that the game was over but he soon recovered and ordered his mercenaries to kill everyone in the Jatha. They fired bullets at the Sangat in Gurdwara hall. Several bullets pierced through Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The dead and dying Singhs were burned. By the time the police and local Sikhs came on the scene, all the dead men had been consumed by the fire. Bhai Lachhman Singh Dharowali who was wounded with a gunshot was tied to a Jand tree and burnt alive. The news spread and Sikhs from all parts of Punjab started their march towards Nankana Sahib. Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabber reached next day with 2200 Singhs armed with *shastras*. Fearing more trouble, Mr King, handed

over the keys of Nankana Sahib to Shiromani Committee and arrested Mahant Narayan Das and his Pashtun mercenaries and charged them with murder, but only Mahant Narayan das and some of the mercenaries were sentenced to death.

There are different versions on number of fatalities in this massacre at 120, 150 or even 200. The government reports placed the death figures at 126.

Mahatma Gandhi visited Nankana Sahib on March 3, 1921. Addressing the gathering, he said: "*I have come to share your anguish and grief. It is interesting indeed to note that the Sikhs in this drama remained peaceful and non-violent from the start to the end. This (role of the Sikhs) has greatly added to the glory and prestige of India "All indications point to the fact that the cruel and barbaric action is the second edition of Jallianwala Bagh massacre rather more evil and more invidious than even Jallianwala" . Gandhi further spoke: "the action of these dimensions could not be perpetrated by Mahant alone. The government officers are also involved in this heinous crime. Where had the authorities gone when the Mahant was making preparations for murderous plans?"*

The Question

It is amply clear from both morchas that British authorities and mahant were prepared to stop morchas at any cost. Sikhs were prepared to attain *shahidies* for the cause and for that *shahidi jathas* were sent. The question is "were these *shahidi jathas* sent as per philosophy of Mahatama Gandhi or Sikh principle of *sant sipahi*". In both morchas Sikhs went to attain *shahidi*, unarmed in a peaceful protest as per Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent satyagrah movement. Did Sikhs went without their five *kakars*? Have they not par-taken *khande Bate di Pahul*? It looks they shunned *sant-sipahi* philosophy which says "if all peaceful measures to resolve a situation fail, it is right to take weapons and attain *shahidi* in the battle field". In both morchas Sikhs did try to resolve the situations by peaceful means. It is also clear that when Sikhs went armed with Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabber, fearing more trouble, Mr King, handed over the keys of Nankana Sahib to Shiromani Committee and arrested Mahant Narayan Das. Had they gone armed with their *shastras* as *sant sipahies* in the first place, most of the casualties could have been prevented. The question is "Is it right to say that Sikhs at that time were influenced by Mahatma Gandhi than by *sant sipahi* philosophy?"