

## PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

### AGITATION OF SIKHS AGAINST BRITISH IN COLONIAL PUNJAB: AN APPRAISAL OF GURDAWARA REFORM MOVEMENT

*Dr. Anam Iftikhar<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Muhammad Abrar Ahmad<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Shumaila Firdos<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Assistant Professor, Dept. of History, Arts and Cultural Heritage, Division of Arts and  
Social Sciences, University of Education, Lahore.

E.mail: <sup>1</sup>[Anam.iftikhar@ue.edu.pk](mailto:Anam.iftikhar@ue.edu.pk), <sup>2</sup>[abrar.ahmad@ue.edu.pk](mailto:abrar.ahmad@ue.edu.pk),  
<sup>3</sup>[Shumaila.firdos@ue.edu.pk](mailto:Shumaila.firdos@ue.edu.pk)

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Sikhs Against British In Colonial Punjab: An Appraisal Of Gurdawara Reform  
Movement-- Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 19(4), 1576-1584.  
ISSN 1567-214x**

**Key Words: Colonial Punjab, Agitation, Reforms, Sikhs, Babar Akalis, Gurdawara,  
S.G.P.C**

#### ABSTRACT

In the twentieth century India was transitioning itself from traditional to modern country in terms of political and social change. It was a period of general renaissance in various spheres of life, religion, social and political customs. Indians were not only getting awareness about their political rights but they were also filled with the passion of nationalism which was being expressed by them at various times. If someone looks at the course of historical development of Indian Colonialism then it is easy to assess that in the start of twentieth century all India was experiencing the same passion. In this study an effort has been made to construct a narrative that this nationalism was not confined to only few castes or creeds, all Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were showing vigorous reaction towards British policies. Particularly Sikh response was intricate and interesting as some Sikhs teamed up with the British, while others aggressively struggled against their rule. Therefore, this paper highlights the role of Sikh community against British in Punjab.

#### INTRODUCTION

The political consciousness within the Sikh community began to emerge in the early 1900s, fueled by the presence of many Sikh diasporas throughout the western world. Nevertheless, the emergence of the Singh Sabha Movement, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, and Shiromani Akali Dal in the late 1920s marked the beginning of a new era in the political history of British Punjab. The administration of Sikh Gurdwaras posed a significant challenge in

the beginning of the year 1920, which fueled the anti-British sentiment in Colonial Punjab to a considerable extent.

These activities primarily aimed to enhance and rejuvenate Gurdwaras, while ensuring their protection under the auspices of the Shromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (S.G.P.C). An organization of Sikh community, Singh Sabha<sup>1</sup> was called for attention towards the issue of the authority of shrines. These associations worked hard in a legal way for several years to get the attention of higher ups against the corrupt administration but the development of anti-British parties like Ghadr and the activities of nationalists urged these Sikhs to adopt the resistive means to record their strong protest. The Punjabi Hindus also involved in the newly developed scenario as they were sided with those Hindu Mahants who were the care taker of the Gurdwaras and declared corrupt by the Sikh organizations. This conflict created a lot of bloodshed and fuss among Sikhs, Colonial Government, Hindu Mahants and Hindu community. In order to create harmony among communities of Punjab British Government announced various legislations on the issue.<sup>2</sup> Sikh community was allowed to use their sacred symbols and were allowed to keep kirpan in jail but still the Sikhs stood firm and showed unwillingness to accept it and tried to get the control of Gurdwaras with force. This resulted in the severe clashes between Government, Government appointed administrators and Sikhs. This episode of conflict caused not only loss of Sikh lives but also gave birth to a political party who adopted the policy of resistance instead of nonviolence. The newly emerged group was entitled as Babbar Akalis who chose to confront with British Government by apprehending their officers and other besieged British officers and spies of Indian descent spies.

According to the Sikh customs in early days of Sikhism the persons who were in charge of Gurdwaras wanted to offer their life and services in the name of God and for the betterment of society.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, they never showed greed for the gifts or offerings of Gurdwaras even there were some Sikh clerics like Bhagat Singh, Lakha Singh and Suba Singh who straightforwardly refused to accept any bland or jagir offered to them by the numerous Sikh sovereigns. However, the time was changing and especially from eighteenth century up to the rise of Sikh misals, the Gurdwaras were under the control of rulers of later Mughal period and their councils in Punjab. This was the time when a lot of Sikh sanctuaries went in the hands of Udasis.<sup>4</sup> The Udasis were religious clerics who devoted themselves for the services of humanity and to narrate the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. These religious clerics were not attached to any particular Sikh religious site but there were some priests who formed their separate shrines or associations. Those who established their own associations became the chief of their Shrines and called as the Mahants.

Arise of Sikh misals and Sikh rule in Punjab also supported these priests or Mahants and gifted land to various Gurdwaras. After the decline of Sikh rule these priests were become negligent towards their duties and responsibilities and especially after the arrival of British in Punjab the condition was totally transformed because the look after of these shrines was now in the hands of those persons who were pro-British, working for the benefits of British and in return were receiving their immense support. Countless Gurdwaras like the

Darbar Sahib and TarnTaran came under the control of Colonial Management due to these Mahants because now these shrines were not serving the holy purpose for all Sikh worshippers but were becoming the source of income and luxury for these Mahants. For example, for a while it was the custom at Golden temple that only rich or upper-classSikhs can visit the temple and present their offerings. The lands belonged to these holy sites were also shifted on the name of these Mahants as own property.

In August 1906, the caretaker of Muktsarwas captured drunk and doing ills within the territory of the shrine. There were reports about the Tarn-Taran and Gurdwara Panja Sahib's that the property associated to these holy shrines were also shifted to the names of other people as private property.<sup>5</sup>The conditions like this were also become the reasons of resent between Sikhs and Colonial Government and also set the path forthe start of modification of management of Gurdwaras. Other reason of clash between Government and Sikh community was Kamagata Maru Calamity<sup>6</sup> and the release of ordersin the name of the sufferers of Kamagata Maru incident by pro-British Sikh priests of Amritsar.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Matter of Rikab Ganj***

These exploitations ofGurdwara possessions came into notice in 1912 when the land of Rikab Ganj Gurdwara in Delhi was allotted to British Government for the sake of construction of Government office. This incident was picked up by Sikh radicals as a golden opportunity to record their protest against the collaboration of Mahants and British Government.<sup>8</sup>Sikhs were discussing about the beginning of a morcha but it was stopped for a while because of First World War. The problem was initiated again in 1918 when Montague-Chelmsford Reforms were announced and Sikhs were ignored politically. The Central Sikh League was inaugurated at Bradlaugh Hall on 30<sup>th</sup> March, 1919.<sup>9</sup>, for the protection of Sikh community. In the second session of this association in 1920 all Sikh leaders and their followers were ready to join movement of non-cooperation against the Colonial Administration. This step of Sikh community was closely monitor by the British Government and they cooled down the issue with the help of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha.<sup>10</sup>

The next problem was raised at the death of Harnam Singh at Sialkot.<sup>11</sup>His son of very tender age was declared as the new cleric of the shrine.<sup>12</sup> This step made the whole Sikh community furious and produced feelings of anger and discontent. They decide to resolve the issue legally and filed a petitionbut were failed. <sup>13</sup>they decided to go one step further and built an association with the name of Khalsa Sewak Jatha and reformed the Gurdwaras. Weekly and daily morning prayer was now being held at Sialkot, in the Memorial of Babe-di-Ber, but it was not a smooth transformation as the other group in the favour of minor of Harnam Singh kept intervening the rituals. Therefore, after many efforts the effected Sikhs arranged a great Diwan on 5 October, 1920. Government monitored this development closely and tried to calm down the situation as in the meantime various areas of Punjab were passing through resistance offered by many Punjabis and British did not want to create further

mess in Sialkot. This was considered as a great success against the corrupt mahants so the revolutionaries thought to reform Golden Temple at Amritsar. During the occupation of Punjab to Colonial Rule in 1849, cleric of Gurdwara Tarn Taran and Golden Temple, Arur Singh was appointed by Colonial Administration who was corrupt and always served the purpose of his British masters. It is worth noting that during the ending years of War in 1919 there was a serious carnage in which a lot of Sikhs lost their lives and this incident Jallianwala Bagh was happened on the orders of General Dyer who later received some gifts from the Akal Takhat.<sup>14</sup> These developments were perceived as a bluff to the martyred Sikhs and their families so the Central Sikh Association held a gathering and passed an order about handing over the Golden Temple's authority to responsible Sikhs.

### *Apathy of British Administration towards the Problem*

In start the Government seemed indifferent towards the issue of authority of Gurdwaras and mismanages the situation. They remained fail to judge the feelings and anger of people of Punjab. Sikh community tried to resolve the problem by filing cases in the court but it was of no gain so frustration was increasing among Sikhs which resulted in the change of management of the Gurdarawa.

During that time no specific political or social platform was available for Sikhs so all these religious issues and political happening of Punjab gave realization to their community for the making of a specific organization who would represent Sikhs for their religious or other rights especially regarding the management of Gurdwaras. In November, 1920 a group of the Panth was chosen to control the management of all Gurdwaras including Golden Temple. As a result, more than hundred Sikhs were selected to get the control of entire Sikh Gurdwaras and Sanctuaries located in Punjab. The association was called as Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee and its members were almost thirty-six.<sup>15</sup> The committee elected Kharak Singh who was a revolutionary and member of Congress as well as member of Central Sikh Association declared as the chief of this party while Sunder Singh was its Vice President. An assembly of seven Sikhs was decided and many other assemblies at local level were established for the look after of Shrines. The Sikhs who were associated with this were also called as Shiromani Akali Dal. Gradually these persons or groups became extremist and took part in Sikh politics. These Akali Jathas were to foster and train the Sikhs for gaining the control of the Gurdwaras from immoral Mahants. To make their cause more specific and common to every person a newspaper in with the name of Akiili, was started.<sup>16</sup>

The start of Prabandhak Committee and Akali Dal commenced the period of sacred discontent between Sikhs and this became the reason of Gurdwara Reform Movement. During 1920 this movement became so intense due to the meeting of Indian Nationalist leader Gandhi with members of Sikh parties somewhere at Amritsar. After this meet up Sikh community joined the Non-Cooperation Drive and many Sikh pupils of Khalisa College, Amritsar left their studies and many teachers boycotted the classes. Strong grudge was also

showed by Sikhs against the British hired representatives of the Akal Takht, Golden Temple, the Khalisa College and moreshrines.

### *Resistance at Different Gurdwaras*

During the time of 1920 these developments were normal but in 1921 situation was totally changed because the situation at Nankana and Amritsar created great trouble between Sikhs and British Administration. Gurdwara Tarn Taran, created a great trouble because the Priest of this shrine was now abusing the powers of his seat. Not only he was morally corrupt but also was indulged in many ill doings and in exploitation of revenue. Due to these activities the command of Gurdwaras became the responsibility of Shiromani Board.<sup>17</sup>

Another incident happened in 1921, when a Sikh named Taru requested Parbandhak Group to seize the guardianship of the Gurdwara. The group was ready to take the charge but Tikka Singh was not prepared for this so he set his place in the upper portion of Gurdwara on 5 April, 1921. The very next morning a clash broke out between Sikh worshippers and those who were at the side of Tikka Singh.

There was a shrine at Nankana which was stable one and was in the possession of Mahant Narain Dass. He was morally corrupt and was threatened by Sikhs for his removal.<sup>18</sup> However, the Government was in full support of him and also sheltered him which made Sikhs more furious and a large gathering of notable Sikhs entered forcibly in the shrine but were killed coldly. This issue generated a spark and spread in whole province like fire. The representative of Colonial Administration reached to the place<sup>19</sup> and handed over the keys to SGPC.<sup>20</sup>

The Priest was seized by the Government and the management of Shrine was handed over to Prabandhak Committee. Punjab's various districts like Amritsar, Lahore, and Sheikhpura were declared as the most affected areas due to the resistance of Sikhs and many Sikh leaders were arrested to avoid the further unrest. However, the start of 1921 considered as the severe political trouble in all over India, as the Moplahs also showed resistance and many British goods and liquor shops were also set on fire, moreover everyone was ready to the law in his hands.

This situation particularly with reference of Sikhs and their struggle about the hold of Gurdwaras, created new philosophies and also provided them political base. Those who believed on the philosophy of resistance, formed a group with the name of Babbar Akals (immortal lions). Various movements were started by them for the dead of Nankana as a martyr's and established many trusts and organizations to provide a support to families of the dead and many institutions were also established in the remembrance of the sacrifices made by them.<sup>21</sup> Many Gurdwaras at Lahore, Amritsar, Gujranwala, Sheikhpura, Gurdaspur, Kamalia, Kanganpur and Manga were handed over to Akalis.

### ***Problem over the Handing over of Gurdawara Keys***

In the end of 1920, another crisis uprose among the members of Prabandhak Committee that they were biased and were not the true representatives of Sikh community so it was decided to hold fresh elections, results of which were challenged again.

Moreover, due to these issues British Administration was reluctant to hand over the management of Golden Temple in the hands of Sikh Committee members; therefore they filed a case in the court. On 29<sup>th</sup> October, a resolution was passed in which it was decided that the keys of the Temple will be handed over to the head of the Prabandhak Committee. This matter became tensed because of the intervention of Government as they did not appoint any Committee so its authority was challengeable for Government. This response generated a spark among different communities especially Sikhs who consider this step as an effort to gain the control of Temple.

### ***Disturbances over Guru Ka Bagh***

Guru Ka Bagh, was located at Amritsar in territory of timbers. In 1921 a rumor spread that Akalis were using the trees of Gurdwara for their own sake. This rumor drawn the attention of Government as well and the accused were taken into the custody of Police. Many top leaderships of Akali group like Mehtab Singh and Master Tara Singh were also detained. Sikhs became reactionary and they in the form of groups started to march towards the shrine. Government took notice of this law-and-order situation and tried to disband the group but as a result clashes were erupted in which many Sikhs were injured. This step of using force by Government on the protestors was severely criticized by other national parties as well. At last, the ownership of Guru Ka Bagh was handed over to Akalis along with the authority of undecided land<sup>22</sup>. This time Sikhs were in direct clash with Government so wherever the prisoners were transported, a large number of Sikh crowds welcomed them. Even it is important to mention that this problem also created restlessness among the Sikh soldiers of Indian Army. Although Government tried to cool down the sentiments of Sikh community but the resistance over the matter remained continue until the Gurdawara Reform Act was passed.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Origin of a new Revolutionary Group***

In the wake of such events many extremist groups were originated in the community of Sikhs who were agitated over the policies of Government. Most of these Sikhs were belonged to Ghadr party. These radicals were called as Babbar Akalis who not only tried to record their protest by offering resistance but also started literary efforts by issuing a communique termed as Babbar Akali Doaba. These groups created much trouble for the Government but most of the Sikh resistance regarding Gurdawara issue was controlled till the summer of 1923<sup>24</sup>

### *Jaito Morcha*

Another significant agitation was seen in the history of Colonial Punjab by Sikhs when the Ripudaman Singh who was ruler of Nabha was changed by Government. Sikhs were angry because they consider him in their favor.<sup>25</sup> Although it was purely an administrative issue and the ruler replaced because of an inquiry report which was against him but due to the ongoing situation and clash between Government and Sikhs, most of the members of Akali group consider this step against their whole community.

A resolution was passed to dedicate the day of 9 September, 1923 as Nabha Day. At many places it was celebrated but at Jaito the gathering was interrupted by local police and they arrested many Sikh protestors. Situation became more tensed and Sikhs from the whole of Punjab started to join the people of Jaito to show solidarity. This situation was too delicate to deal with but now British Administration wanted to resolve the issue of Sikh community on permanent basis so many Sikh leaders were arrested or were under house arrest. In 1924, the time a cluster of Sikhs were approaching to Janitor, police warned them and on refusal opened fire on them which resulted in loss of human lives. There was feeling of discontent among every Indian and many leaders including Quaid-i-Azam and Madam Mohan Malaviya tried to raise the issue in the Assembly as well.<sup>26</sup>

### *Sikh Gurdwaras Act*

The tension between Sikhs and British Government was so much intense that now wanted to resolve the issue on permanent basis so William Birdwood on March 1924, as representative of Colonial Management started discussions with Sikhs. After him Malcolm Hailey became Lieutenant Governor whose chosen two-way policies of holding talks with flexible Sikhs while controlling the radicals through oppressive policies. Many reform committees were formed to keep Sikhs away from showing agitation. His policies brought a fruitful change and with a team of five Sikhs, a Gurdwara bill was drafted and approved as law in 1925.<sup>27</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

Punjab has remained the epitome of British rule in India and has generated a lot of discussions related to its role in agitations against the British Colonialism. In Punjab's politics, twentieth century marked a significant shift in the Indian subcontinent, with various communities, including Muslims and Hindus, actively working against British rule both politically and communally. It was a time of great change and resistance. British government adopted different tactics to cool down the wave of nationalism among Punjabis. Regarding Sikh community British adopted policy of maintaining good relations with the priests of Gurdwaras by giving them extensive facilities and lands. When these priests defied the teachings and values of Sikh Gurus, it generated feelings of anger in the Sikh circles. Moreover, the British encroachment in the Sikh religious shrines further intensified the situation and became the catalyst for the Sikh agitation against British. This agitation led

towards the development of a scheme for proper management of Gurdwaras. Although Sikhs remained successful in drafting a legislation for the preservation of their holy places and values but this development also provided them the pattern of their relations with British. Many Sikhs isolates themselves from British Government and adopted an uneasy and distanced relation till the independence of India in 1947.

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- In 1907 Canadian Government passed some laws to stop Asians from coming to Canada, and to fulfill the these laws a ship took on charter by Gurdit Singh, which was named as the Kamagata Maru. It was started off from Hong-Kong on 4 April 1914 and reached at Vancouver but could not get permission to enter in Canada. On 23 July 1914 it sailed off to return towards India and arrived at Budge Budge harbor Calcutta where by the on the order of Government innocent Punjabis were killed. This tragedy infuriated the whole Sikh community. Sardul Singh Caveeshar,, The Sikh Studies, (Lahore:National Publications, 1937), 188.
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- During his life time, Guru Nanak had visited Sialkot and sat under a Ber tree, which exist upto this time, the Gurdwara is known as Babe-di-Ber. After the annexation this institution was under the priests who were supporter of the British Government. Teja Singh, Gurdwara Reform Movement and the Sikh Awakening, 121-136.
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Ibid,199.

“The commissioner Mr King, made a personal statement on the incident to the Legislative Council on 15 March 1921. He said: 'Unfortunately the precipitate action of one party threw out our calculations. Lachman Singh's party went to Nankana quite unexpectedly, and there was no one in authority to prevent the dreadful happenings that occurred’.

Khushwant Singh, A History of Sikhs Vol.II.199.

Three murderers of 130 Akalis, hanged to death and two were transported for life. Ibid.

OR/L/PJ/6/1873.

Khushwant Singh, History of Sikhs,204.

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The Shiromani Committee was asked by people to interrogate the Nabha issue to which the Committee responded that because of having sympathies to Akalis he had to rendered good services.' Statement by Mehtab Singh in the Alkali Leaders Case. Khushwant Singh, History of Sikhs, 208.

Ibid, 330.

The Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1935 listed 232 shrines while another 28 were added later which were considered as Sikh Gurdwaras. The other part listed 224 places of Udasis were not declared Gurdwaras unless they terms. completed specific. The most significant part of the law was to define a Sikh as 'one who had faith in the ten gurus and the Granth Sahib. <http://punjablaws.gov.pk/laws/33.html>