

THE ORGANISATIONAL SET UP OF THE SHIROMANI AKALI DAL IN GURDWARA REFORM MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The Gurdwara Reform Movement from 1920 to 1925 has occupied a very important place not only in the Sikh history, but also in the regional and national history. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (S.G.P.C) was the result of Akali Movement. Soon after the formation of the S.G.P.C. its military wing, the Shiromani Akali Dal was formed by uniting the local Akali Jathas under one central body in order to intensify struggle against the mahants. The peaceful agitation was adopted as a weapon to fight the vested interests in the Sikh shrines on the one hand and the bureaucratic machinery in Punjab on the other. This weapon proved very effective. The Akalis were supposed to take the oath that they would not resort to violence. One of the most striking features of the Gurdwara Reform Movement was that it was carried on in the true spirit of non-violence. The agitation was stopped in 1925, when Sikh Gurdwaras and Shrines Bill (The Sikh Gurdwara Act VIII of 1925) were passed on 28 July 1925.

KEYWORDS: *S.G.P.C., Akali, Jatha, Gurdwara*

INTRODUCTION

The term 'Akali' has been used, ever since the days of Guru Gobind Singh. They wore dark blue garments and a peculiar headdress. These people fought most zealously and came to be called *Nihangs* or dragons. They were also called Akalis or deathless. The term Akali has been derived from *Akal* which in turn has originated from Sanskrit word *Kal*, meaning 'time'. The prefix 'A' stands for 'not' or 'without' which imparts towards *Akal* the meaning of immortality. Akali was a follower of Timeless one God. Originally it was applied to irregular Sikh soldiers of the eighteenth/early nineteenth century who fought with reckless bravery on behalf of the *Panth*, acknowledging no leader who was not himself an Akali. During the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Akali Phula Singh was the famous leader of the Akalis. Akalis were regarded as the custodians of the Akal Takht at Amritsar and directors of religious ceremonies.¹ The establishment of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (S.G.P.C.) provided to be a turning point in the history of the Sikhs in 1920. Its main aim was to manage reform and control the Gurdwaras from the corrupt *Mahants*. To achieve this object, Akali *Jathas* were organized by the S.G.P.C. The *Jathabandi* system has owned its history in Sikhism and it has become part of the *pathetic* policy. With the organization of the S.G.P.C., this system was revived and reorganized as the Akali Dal (Army of immortals) and was maintained by the S.G.P.C. under the direct control of a central body, The Shiromani Akali Dal which became the nucleus of the Sikh activities.²

Akali Dal was the primary organization of the Sikhs. Akali Dal was formed on 14th December 1920 at Akal Takhat, Amritsar. The first organizational elections were held on 24th January 1921. Bhai Sarmukh Singh Jhabal was the first *Jathedar* (president). Its secretary was Varyam Singh of Mohar assisted by Arjun Singh of Dhirke. Its first name was Akali Dal. To distinguish the central body from the provincial *Jathas*, prefix *Shiromani* (literally: the foremost) on 29th March 1922.³ The more radical elements organized a semi-military corps of volunteers known as the Akali Dal (army of immortals). The Akali Dal was to raise and train men for "action" in taking over the Gurdwaras from recalcitrant *Mahants*. The Akalis vowed to remain non-violent under all circumstances.⁴ The sense of triumph, which came with it filled Sikh leaders with a crusading enthusiasm and they started occupying Gurdwara after Gurdwara. The Akalis jumped in spontaneously as volunteers to seize the Gurdwaras. They came from all over the province in *Jathas* (Bands) organized district wise. Their battle cry was "*Aa gai fauj Akali, dera kar do Khali*" (the Akali army has come, evacuate Gurdwaras). The multiple leadership of Akali *Jathas* came to be organized under a unified body called the Shiromani Akali Dal, which thus acquired a semi-military character, but they were non-violent and they wore dark blue and black turbans during the Gurdwara reform movement. The first *Jatha*, called the *Sewak Jatha* was organized by the people of the Sialkot.⁵ The S.G.P.C. proceeded to organize Shiromani Akali Dal at the base level with the active participation of people of all levels going down to village level all over the Punjab. A survey carried out by the Criminal Investigation Department from November 1921 to February 1922 revealed that the drive had met with a great success. It encompassed all classes of the Sikhs like Jats, Khatri, Aroras, Mazhbis, sweepers, carpenters, loan as reflecting the composition of the population in different districts. The women were associated with increasing members. The Akali had essentially become a rural movement. The brain behind the movement was, however, supplied by the educated Sikh townsmen of professional trading and shop keeping classes.⁶ Akali campaign was essentially a rural movement and its followers were men of physique with national history. The rural Akalis had adopted a strict Sikh identity, they strongly committed to orthodoxy that they believed to be represented by original Sikhism.⁷

In the beginning there was no organized system for the recruitment of Akali volunteers. The ranks of the reformers were prepared to make sacrifices for the Akali cause. When the movement gained momentum, a regular system for the recruitment to the Akali ranks was started. Akali *Jathedars* and preachers from the Akali headquarters often went to the villages and arranged religio-political Diwan in which they explained the objectives of the movement for Gurdwara reforms. All those who volunteered to join the Akali ranks were grouped in smaller *Jathas* named either after the areas they belonged to or after some prominent Sikh personage. An influential local volunteer was appointed *Jathedar*.⁸

The Amritsar district was the first recruiting ground. The first effort at concerted action was made when at a Diwan organized by the Central Sikh League at Tarn Taran in July 1920, Amar Singh Jhabal appealed to the audience to get themselves enrolled as *Shahids* for the repair of the wall of Gurdwara Rakabganj, Delhi. According to official report some 70 to 80 Akalis volunteered themselves to be enrolled as *Shahids*. Soon the figure in the state rose to well over 700, including some Hindu and Muslim *Shahids*. *Jathedar* Kartar Singh Jhabbar was one first Akali to form a *Jatha* to undertake the work of reform in the shrine at Nankana Sahib. It was on 24th December 1920 that some prominent Akali workers of the area met at the Gurdwara of Maharani Nakain Shekhupura and formed the first ever Akali *Jatha* which named *Akali Jatha Khara Sauda Bar* and Jhabbar became its *Jathedar*. The formation of similar *Jatha* found favor in other districts and soon they began to appear all over central Punjab, by that time, the Akali leadership launched its struggle against the government.⁹

The majority of important *Jathas* were linked with Shiromani Akali Dal which organized and supervised the numerous Akali *Jathas* of the province. The Central Sikh league also encouraged the Akali *Jathas* while Akalis started taking over the Gurdwaras from the *Mahants*. The activities of the Central Sikh League supplemented and helped.¹⁰

The Shiromani Akali Dal was a central organizing agency of the Akali *Jathas* during the Gurdwara reform movement. The headquarter of the Shiromani Akali Dal was situated in Amritsar, in the same office as the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, to which body it was subordinate. General meetings were called, each *Jatha* deputing representative, called *pratinidhs* on five percent basis of its total strength. The chief function of Shiromani Akali Dal was to maintain the registers of membership of the *Jathas* which were subordinate to it, to convey them the instructions, received from the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and to arrange for the deputation of *jathas* on national work. A *Jatha* must have a minimum of five members, but there was no maximum limit. The larger *Jathas* had a membership running into four figures. The sub-*Jathas* varied considerably in strength, but the number of members ordinarily did not exceed 50. The more progressive *Jathas* had regular bearers who performed scriptorial work and dealt with financial matters. The *Jathedar* was assisted in the work of the formal admission and scrutiny by a committee of five selected men known as the *Panj Piaras*.¹¹

The following were the important *Jathas*, in each instance the name of the head *Jathedar*, the location of the *Jatha* and its approximate numerical strength are given:-

- The *Doaba Jatha*, comprising Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur districts and Kapurthala state. The headquarter of this *jatha* were in Jalandhar and its *Jathedar* was Piara Singh of Langeri, District Hoshiarpur. Its strength was probably cost less than 3,000.
- The *Khalsa Dewan Malwa*, or the *Ranjit Khalsa Malwa Jatha*, the jurisdiction of which extended over Ludhiana and Ambala districts and Patiala State. Its *jathedar* was Arjan Singh of Sekha in Patiala state and its numerical strength was nearly 1,200. Its headquarters were at Sekha.
- The *Harbor Akali Jatha* of Kapurthala State with Bishan Singh of Kapurthala as its *Jathedar* and its strength was about 2,000.
- The *Nirbhai Akali Dal*, with Sewa Singh of Khanger and Gajjan Singh as *Jathedars*. The *Jatha* had the same jurisdiction that of *Jatha* no. 2, its headquarters were at Ludhiana and strength over 2,000.
- The *Gargaj Akali Jatha*, with Teja Singh Bhuchar as *Jathedar* and headquarters at Tarn Taran commanded influence in the *Majha* tract and had the strength of nearly 1,500.
- The *Khalsa Central Majha Diwan* is also known as the *Shiromani Panth Milauni Jatha* with headquarters at Kirtangarh, police station Sadar, Amritsar, was managed by *Panj Piaras*. Its strength was about 1,200.
- The *Guru Ram Das Jatha* with headquarters earlier at Ramdas but later at Guru-Ka-Bagh (Ajnala) with Amar Singh Jhabbal as its reader. This *Jatha* had about 500 members.
- The *Shahidi Diwan Bar Dharowali*, the headquarters of which were at Dharowali, police station, Sangla, district Sheikhpura. The *Jathedar* was Sangat Singh of Dharowali. Its influence extended over Sheikhpura district, but was particularly strong in the Sangla and Manawala areas..

- *The Akali Dal Khara Sauda Bar*, headquarters of which were at Sacha Sauda, Police Station Chuharkana, district Sheikhpura. Its *Jathedar* was Kartar Singh Jhabhar and its influence was the strongest in the jurisdictions of police station Chuharkana and Sheikhpura. The combined membership of these two *jathas* of Sheikhpura districts was about 2,200.
- *The Lyallpur Jatha*, had a membership of not less than 3,000. This *Jatha* were divided into four sections, one of each tehsil of the district. The chief *Jathedar* of the district and president of the Akali Dal Committee was Tripat Singh of Chak 71-J.B. Police station Thikriwala.¹²

The condition of the membership of the Akali Jatha was that every member should believe in the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib and observe the five 'K' s. The signing of the admission form was usually all that was required of them would be Akali. Each *Jatha* possessed its own *granthis*, *ragis* and *updeshaks*, whose duty was to tour the villages, hold diwans, encourage the enlistment of Akalis and disseminate Akali propaganda.

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee in order to arouse fresh enthusiasm for Gurdwara reform and stimulate Akali recruitment called for the submission of the list of 5,000 Akalis who would be prepared to sacrifice their lives on behalf of Gurdwara reforms. All such volunteers were to be called *Shahids* or martyrs. A definite number of volunteers were required from each district, the number in case of the most important. Sikh districts being fixed at 500. The number of *Shahids* actually enrolled is not known.¹³ In addition to the above local *jathas*, a central force of Akali volunteers called the *Akali Fauj* was also organized under the direct supervision of the S.G.P.C. The *Akali Fauj* was planned as an organization of selfless Sikh volunteers prepared to sacrifice their lives at the call of Akali leadership for the cause of religious reform. The response from the Sikh masses was more than encouraging, was evident from the fact that the original target of 10, 000 volunteers having been quickly reached. It had to be raised to 30,000. The Fauj organized house-to-house collection of funds, and volunteers.¹⁴ Akali volunteers came from the Sikh peasantry especially from the districts of Lyallpur, Sheikhpura, Amritsar, Jalandhar, and Hoshiarpur. Thus out of a total of 15,506 Akali volunteers in different areas in early 1922, the number of *Jat* Sikhs was 10,200 Rawalpindi division provided the highest proportion of non-agriculturists mainly traders. Next to them, low caste agricultural laborers and other rural non-*Jats* made up 2,399 volunteers. 1,270 volunteers were military pensioners and discharged soldiers and returned immigrants numbered 248. In Rawalpindi district, the majority of Akali volunteers consisted of educated *Khatri* Sikhs.

The work of organization was well-defined. The regular committees were appointed for the issue of directives. Every member of the *Jatha* was instructed in his duties. His relationship with the higher organizational machinery was clearly defined. A similar system prevailed among the Akali *Jathas* of the *Bar ilaqa* where the proportion of literates was higher. It was evident that the Sikh peasantry constituted the backbone of the Akali movement and was mainly responsible for the spectacular success. The power and prestige of S.G.P.C. were further enhanced by continued material and moral support, from the Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs in Punjab, and through the backing of the national leaders. Mass support of the Sikh peasantry and the sympathies of rank and file of the Sikh military pensioners made the S.G.P.C. Aware of the important position it had come to occupy.¹⁵

Table 1: Showing the Numerical Strength and Composition of the Akali Dal

Tract of Country	S. No. of District	District	No. of Akalis	Jats	Menials	Other than Jats and Menials	Returned Emigrants	Military Pensioners	Discharged Soldiers	Convicted Bad Characters
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Eastern Punjab (mixed population)	1	Ambala	159	134	23	2	-	1	2	
Malwa Tract (preponderatingly Sikh population)	2	Ludhiana	672	521	151	-	31	102	138	
	3	Hoshiarpur	1058	944	114	-	28	73	75	
	4	Jalandhar	916	749	167	-	73	74	74	
	5	Ferozepur	446	344	102	-	27	25	55	
Majha Tract	6	Gurdaspur	909	650	259	-	3	34	48	5
Preponderatingly Sikh population	7	Amritsar	1363	1108	255	-	33	90	62	79
	8	Lahore	1722	912	587	223	39	15	70	183
Rechan Doab Sikhs strongly represented	9	Sheikhupura	2198	1445	250	503	3	-	65	67
	10	Gujranwala	444	171	88	185	2	-	23	53
	11	Sialkot	720	495	80	145	-	37	48	
Canal Colonies mixed population	12	Lyallpur	3148	2358	274	516	4	54	63	84
	13	Montgomery	138	28	46	64	-	-	-	
Rawalpindi Division	14	Gujrat	314	313	1	-	1	3	-	
	15	Jhelum	526	-	-	526	-	3	5	
	16	Shahpur	191	28	2	161	-	1	1	
	17	Rawalpindi	582	-	-	582	4	2	27	16
		Total	15,506	10,200	2,399	2,907	248	514	756	471

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