II

ORIGIN OF THE BABBAR AKALI MOVEMENT

So the Babbar Akali Movement was the natural sequel to the Gurdwara Reform Movement. The Sikhs had started a vigorous passive resistance movement for the control and management of the Gurdwaras under the pressure of the Sikh opinion, sometimes backed by the show of force. The Mahants began to yield and agreed to become paid granthis. The formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee on 15th December, 1920 and of the Akali Dal on 16th December, 1920 was a prelude of the coming struggle. Even before this, the Sikhs had started an agitation, for the control of the Gurdwaras of Chosala Sahib at Lahore and Babe Ki Ber at Sialkot. The Gurdwara Baba Ki Ber, Sialkot, was passed over to the Sikhs on October 6, 1920, when C.M. King, Commissioner Lahore Division approved the Committee of 13 persons under S. Kharak Singh to control the Gurdwara. On 12th October, 1920, Bhai Teja Singh Bhuchar made a sudden swoop on the Akal Takhat and took possession of the shrine.

The control of Darbar Sahib, Amritsar and Akal Takhat passed into the Sikh hands. On November 19, 1920, Gurdwara of Panja Sahib was also brought under their control. The

3. Ibid., p.266.
Panjab Government heaved a sigh of relief only on December 12, 1920 when the moderate Sikhs like Sardar Sunder Singh Majithia, Sardar Harbans Singh Atari and Sardar Sunder Singh Ramgarhia were elected President, Vice-President and Secretary of the Shirovani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. The Government had always been apprehensive of the results of surrendering to the advocates of ultr-Sikhism.

The movement was proceeding, as the Government thought, on constitutional lines and the moderate element was sufficiently strong to discourage any hasty action. But the suddenness with which the Sikh affairs were undergoing a change, falsified the hopes of the Government. The authorities were insensitive to the temper of the times. The official attitude, that a person in whose name property was registered was prima facie the owner and could be ousted only by means of a suite was galling to the awakened Sikh masses. The three ways open to the Sikhs to carry out reform such as boycott, pressure of public opinion and litigation had proved ineffective. The radical Sikhs who were sore at the malversation and abuses of every kind eschewed the ordinary processes of law and tried to capture the Gurdwaras. While professing to act in a non-violent manner, a few zealot Akalis like Teja Singh Chuharkana, Kartar

4. Ibid., p.267.
Singh Jhabbar and Teja Singh Bhuchar activated the campaign for the forcible seizure as well of the Gurdwaras. At the same time the politico-religious propaganda was started in the rural areas and the Sikh religious enthusiasm was assiduously nursed. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, whose object was to obtain control over all the Sikh Gurdwaras and religious institutions, soon came to be controlled by a caucus of extremists to whom the cause of religious reform differed little from extreme nationalism. This unnerved the authorities. The Sikhs were now coming closer to the Indian National Congress as well. The Central Sikh League in its second session from 18th to 20th October, 1920 passed a resolution of non-cooperation with the government, despite its bait to concede the demand of complete control of the Sikh shrines. By this time the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee had jettisoned the old Sikh idea of dependence on the government and began to mould the destiny of the Sikh nation.

With the transfer of the Golden Temple and Akal Takhat to the Sikh community, the attached Gurdwaras of Tarn Taran and Baba Atal also fell into their hands. The actual possession of the Tarn Taran shrine was obtained only on 25th January, 1921 "at the sacrifice of two precious lives".

Sohan Singh Josh is of the view that the defiant and truculent attitude of the Mahants and subsequent attack on the unarmed Akalis was at the instigation of C.M. &ing, Commissioner, Lahore, Division. However, the local authorities realising the innocence of the Akalis, debarred the Mahants from entering the Gurdwara and passed on the Gurdwara into the hands of the reformers. The Gurdwara Reform movement had caught a momentum now. On 14th February, 1921 Maurangabad and on 18th February, 1921 Khadur Sahib Gurdwaras were brought under the control of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. The aim so far obviously was to reform management of the Gurdwaras and not to expel the Mahants. These were captured only when the Mahants became truculent with the connivance of the officials.

The Sikhs were much alarmed at the acts of Mahant Harain Das of Nankana Sahib Gurdwara, who, like his predecessor, Mahant Sadhu Ram, began to lead irreligious and licentious life. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee resolved on January 24, 1921 to call upon the Sikhs to assemble in a diwan at Nankana Sahib from March 4-6, 1921 so that Mahant might be impressed upon, the urgency of reform. Some zealot reformers like Kartar Singh Jhabbar even talked of forcible occupation of the Gurdwara. The Mahant on the other hand "began to collect weapons with which to defend himself from the attack planned

13. Ibid., p.57.
The preparation by the Mahant could not have gone unnoticed and official inaction to dissuade the Mahant from the suicidal step stemmed only due to their complicity in the whole affair. Mr. C.M. King, Commissioner Lahore Division, received a deputation of the Mahants in December, 1920 and gave certain legal advice which was published and freely distributed by Baba Kartar Singh Bedi. This created very bad effect and it was considered that this might lead to bloodshed. The fear was not unfounded. The change in the attitude of the Mahants followed the change in the policy of the Government. Mahant Narain Dass who had agreed to enter into a dialogue, failed to turn up for talks on 7th February, 1921 at Facha Souda and on February 14, 1921, at Sheikhpura. Instead, he evolved a strategy to murder the top Akali leaders during the diwan to be organised by them from March 4-6, 1921. The information regarding this nefarious plan was supplied to Kartar Singh Jhabbar by his confidant Avtar Singh, who lived in the company of Mahant Narain Dass. Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabbar along with Bhai Lachhman Singh of Dharowal and Bhai Buta Singh of Lyallpur decided to occupy Gurdwara Janam Asthan on February 20, when Mahant would be busy

14. Punjab Legislative Council Proceedings, March, 1921, C.M. King confessed this in the personal explanation, in the council.
15. Sahni, Ruchi Ram, Struggle for Reform in Sikh Shrines, op.cit., p.64.
with the Sikh Santan conference at Lahore. Though they tried to keep their move a closely guarded secret from the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee but, somehow, S. Teja Singh Samundari, Master Tara Singh and Sardar Marchand Singh Lyallpuri got the wind of it. They reached Lahore and were joined by Sardar Sardul Singh Caveeshar, Master Sunder Singh Lyallpuri, Sardar Jaswant Singh of Jhabal and Bhai Dalip Singh. S. Jaswant Singh and Bhai Dalip Singh were asked to dissuade the Jathas from reaching Nankana Sahib. They contacted Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabbar and it was left to Bhai Dalip Singh to contact Sardar Lachhman Singh of Dharewal at Chander Kot, but he failed to establish links with him there.

He reached Nankana Sahib and sent a messenger to Lachhman Singh who agreed not to proceed but coaxed by Bhai Tehal Singh went to the Gurdwara to pay obeisance. Thereupon the ghastly crime was perpetrated upon the innocent Sikhs. They were subjected to bullets and firing without any provocation and "without parley or question". The number of the killed will remain a mystery for ever but the Panjab Government conceded 130 deaths. Karam Singh Station Master, who heard the sound of the

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21. The Tribune, Lahore, 15 September, 1921.
22. See Foot note 89, Ch.1.
bullets, left for the Gurdwara and came to know of the facts. He, immediately sent telegrams to the various quarters.²³ The Deputy Commissioner of Sheikhupura, Mr. J.C. Currie reached there around 12-30 p.m. The Sub-Inspectors of Warburton and Mangatwala Police Stations reached after him. C.W. King, Commissioner of Lahore Division with a military force of 100 British and 100 Indian soldiers and the D.I.G. of Police and several Sikh Sardars arrived in the evening. The military was put on guard.²⁴ The tragedy had shaken all and sundry. Sir John Maynard assured in the Panjab Legislative Council on March 22, 1921 that the Government would make every effort to conduct a full and impartial enquiry²⁵ and would bring the offenders to justice to assuage the intensity of the Sikh agony.

The authorities, immediately set to work and arrested Mahant Martin Dass, two of his disciples and 26 Pathans. The Gurdwara was also put under the protection of the Government. Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabbar was infuriated at it and set out from the Gurdwara Khara Sauda with 200 Akalis and reached Jana Asthan Gurdwara trampling every order under foot and ignoring

²³. Telegrams were sent to Sir Edward Maclagan, the Lieutenant Governor of the Panjab, D.C. Sheikhupura, Mr. J.C. Currie; F.P. Sheikhupura; Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and Mahatma Gandhi.

²⁴. The Civil and Military Gazette, Lahore, February 22, 1921.

every authority. At this show of force, the Commissioner yielded and handed over the keys to a Committee of seven members under the Presidentship of Sardar Harbans Singh Atari. 26 The Mahants of other local Gurdwaras also accepted the control of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, without any further procrastination. This tragedy suscititated the Sikh anger. They suspected intrigue behind the carnage of the innocent and non-violent Sikhs. Some of them openly expressed this view to the then, Panjab Governor, Sir Edward Maclagan, on his arrival at Nankana Sahib on 22nd February, 1921. 27 It was sincerely believed that an avoidable tragedy could have been averted. The leaders of the Congress, the Sikh League, the Chief Khalsa Diwan and the Sikh members of the Panjab Legislative Council reached the spot and expressed their shock. Mahatma Gandhi called it a "second edition of Dyerism, more barbarous, more calculated and more fiendish than the Dyerism of Jallianwala." 28 He strongly believed that in this carnage "Government also had a hand." 29 On 3rd March, 1921 he attended a diwan.

27. Sahni, Ruchi Ram, Struggle for Reform in Sikh Shrines, op.cit., p.79.
29. Sahni, Ruchi Ram, Struggle for Reform in Sikh Shrines, op.cit., p.82.
in which S. Kartar Singh Jhabbar spoke, that "just as the rising sun awakens the people from sleep, in a like manner, preparations for Swaraj have raised the Sikhs from their slumber. That is why they have demanded religious freedom as the first step towards the attainment of their objective." What the Mahant of Nankana Sahib had done was unparalleled in the history of mankind. Since then the Sikhs had made up their mind not to let the Mahants make Gurdwaras resorts of gamblers, wine bibbers and bad characters.\(^{31}\)

This tragedy turned a larger part of the Sikh Community into the proponents of the reform of the Gurdwaras and consequently they became Akalis.\(^{32}\) They, subsequently, stepped up the process of occupying the Gurdwaras forcibly. The control of Luliani on February 23, 1921; Behr on February 27, 1921; Rori Sahib on February 28, 1921; Sach Khand (Chuharkana) on March 5, 1921; Gurdwara Manak on March 6, 1921; Tham Sahib at Jhabbar on March 7, 1921 and Gurdwara Ram Das on March 12, 1921, by the Sikhs was a pointer to the new mood of the community.\(^{33}\)

It was the immediate result of the massacre at Nankana Sahib which

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32. Ibid., p.545.
accentuated the prejudices of the reforming party against the incumbents of the Gurdwaras. It also led to the crisis of confidence. The Sikhs lost faith in the Government. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, in its meeting, held from 4-6 March, 1921 at Nankana Sahib, boycotted the Government Inquiry Committee. It was Master Mota Singh who brought the resolution proposing the boycott of the Inquiry Committee to investigate the case of martyrs. The resolution was passed despite the opposition of Sardar Harbans Singh Atari, Bhai Jodh Singh and Sardar Kartar Singh Jhabbar. It was also resolved to take over the Gurdwaras forcibly if those were not handed over by April 3, 1921. This incensed the Panjab Government. Since then, its policy was ranged totally against the Akali agitation. It embarked upon a path of repression. It put Mr. J.W. Bowring, notoriously hostile to the Sikh aspirations, incharge of the investigation. It encouraged members of the Chief Khalsa Diwan to collaborate with the Government and considered them natural leaders. Sardar Sunder Singh Majithia, who was

37. Sahni, Ruchi Ram, Struggle for Reform in Sikh Shrines, op.cit., p.66.
a member of the Legislative Council and was sworn in on February 23, 1921. In the eyes of the radical Sikhs, he became a Jholichuck. The Panjab Government now followed a two-pronged policy of suppressing the Akali movement and at the same time initiating such a Gurdwara Bill which might ensure its direct or indirect control. The letter of the Government of India to the Governor of the Panjab also showed concern at the lawlessness of the Sikhs and advised him to exercise control immediately. Then the wholesale arrests began and about 150 Akalis were arrested and most of them were convicted of various charges. S. Kartar Singh Jhabbar was sentenced to 18 years of imprisonment and S. Teja Singh Bhuchar to seven years of imprisonment on the charges of dacoities, robberies and thefts, etc.

44. Sahni, Ruchi Ram, Struggle for Reform in Sikh Shrines, op.cit., p.67.
Thus the leaders who were in the vanguard of the Gurdwara Reform movement were put behind the bars. The whole Sikh community was shocked at the convictions of their venerated leaders. Meanwhile, the control of the Akali Dal and the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee also passed into the hands of the professed non-cooperators. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee passed a resolution to free all the Akalis by 10th April, 1921, reiterating its stand that it did not believe in the forcible occupation of the Gurdwaras. But the Nankana affair and its after-math brought to the fore another group to which non-violence was nauseating. They advocated non-cooperation but decried its programme of non-violence. The group was deeply inspired by Master Mota Singh, who escaped police net after making anti-government speeches in the Sikh divans. His speeches aroused the Sikh militants to take recourse to violence and murder all those who were allegedly responsible for the Nankana carnage. These Akalis met separately at Boshiarpur on the occasion of the Thirteenth Sikh Education Conference, held from 25th to 27th March, 1921. They created disturbance in the conference as well and worked on a separate programme.


47. The Akali, Lahore, April 1921.
They were equally patriotic believing in the militant traditions of the Nihangs. They decided to murder C.H. King, the Commissioner of Lahore Division, J.W. Bowring, S.P., C.I.D., Mahant Dewa Dass of Nankana and Basant Dass of Manak, Sardar Sunder Singh Majithia as well as Baba Kartar Singh Bedi, all alleged to be responsible for the Nankana tragedy. The plan misfired and the brain behind the scheme had to abscond, but this put the group on a different track. Thus was formed the nebulous terrorist group. Its formal appearance paved the way for the movement which came to be known as the Babbar Akali Movement.

Evan Khan Sahib Mir Fazal Imam, D.S.P., C.I.D., Panjab also alluded to this when he stated that "after the Nankana affair certain Akalis conspired together to murder the government officials and its supporters. Two conspirators were arrested. Kishan Singh went into hiding in the Doaba and all the efforts of the police to arrest him failed for a considerable time. This organisation (Chakarvarti Jatha), subsequently merged into the Babbar Akali Jatha. No wonder, then, that the Babbar Akali movement took birth after the Nankana Tragedy. Master Mota Singh formed a band of Sikh desperadoes to avenge the murder of the innocent Sikhs. This band undertook to protect Master Mota Singh at the cost of their lives and acted as his bodyguards.

49. Home-Political, File No.134/II/1923, p.75, Also Home-Political File No.265/1922, p.12.
S. Kishan Singh Gargai was foremost among his devotees who further carried on a relentless campaign of preaching rebellion and threatening loyalists. He gathered round him a band of activists, who subsequently came to be known as the Babbar Akalis.52

The Government policy during the Gurdwara Reform movement and the atrocious treatment meted out to the Akali prisoners added insult to the injury. With every excess, the militants became more desperate. The Sikh peasants had been "committed to a policy of self-determination and had been induced by some mysterious process of mass psychology to enter a sphere of activity which was of national interest and was bitterly anti-British."53

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee was aware that violence would only have retrogressive effect, and exerted its influence to restrain the more impetuous of its followers who were expressing their readiness to settle the Gurdwara issue at the point of the sword.54 Despite this clear position, the Government attitude was not helpful. It was bent upon controlling the Gurdwara Reform movement through its stooge, the Chief Khalsa Diwan. The confrontation of the loyalists and non-cooperators on 11th May,1921, once again demonstrated the majority of the radicals in the S.G.P.C., when

52. Home-Political File No.206/1926, p.10.
53. Smith, V.M., Confidential Memorandum, op.cit., p.299.
54. Ibid., p.276.
loyalists failed to forestall the resolution of non-cooperation. The Government put Sardul Singh Caelesher under arrest on 27th May, 1921 as it was he who had spearheaded the non-cooperation resolution. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee headed by F. Kharak Singh also endorsed the policy of non-cooperation, on 28th August, 1921. The Akali leaders began their tour of the province urging the Sikhs to join the Akali Dal and rise as one man to liberate their Gurdwaras. For this purpose a Shahidi Dal was raised in September, 1921. At Teja and Hothian a large number of Akalis appeared as if by magic and captured the Gurdwaras on September 6, 1921 and November 1, 1921, respectively.

The Government, once again, tried to brow-beat the Sikhs on key's affair. On October 29, 1921 the Sarbrah of the Golden Temple was asked by the S.G.P.C. to hand over the keys to its President. The Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar sent his nominee to collect keys from the Sarbrah to forestall the S.G.P.C. decision. This led to an agitation. The Deputy Commissioner, thus, threw a lighted match in the highly inflammable powder keg. The clamping of Seditious Meetings Act and arrest of 193 leading Akalis failed to cow them down. The committee

declared that the surrender of the keys to S. Kharak Singh, the uncrowned King of the Sikhs, would alone give them satisfaction. When the Government found "that no body among the Sikhs was prepared to contest the claims of the SGPC to represent the religious views of the community, it acquiesced in the management of the temple by that body" and handed over the keys of the treasury to S. Kharak Singh. The Morcha on Key's affair was started on 7th November, 1921 and came to an end on 17th January, 1922. The Government also had to release the prisoners unconditionally. The unique response of the Sikh Community as well as ceaseless propaganda campaign by the Chakravarti Akalis against this high-handedness of the Government had aroused, a wave of resentment. Consequently, the Government had to yield and the Sikhs, thus, won, "First Decisive Battle For India's Freedom." In the Key's affair, the Punjab Government had humbled itself to the dust before the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee.

To retrieve its prestige, lost in the Key's affair, the Government committed another folly. Mahant Sunder Dass of Guru Ka Bagh had agreed to serve under a committee of eleven members appointed by the SGPC on 23rd August, 1921, but the land remained in his possession. The Sikhs used to hew wood from

the land for the common kitchen and Mahant, under instigation from the high-ups, lodged a complaint against the Akalis, and that also after the arrests, to support a step already taken in consonance with the instructions issued by the Home Secretary. The Panjab Government found an excuse to implement its policy of suppression of the Akalis. The authorities arrested 5 Akalis on 9th August, 1922, the day when this Morcha was launched. It lasted upto 17th November, 1922 and till that date the number of arrests amounted to 5605 including 35 members of the SGPC. The Government tried various tactics. It abandoned rounding up the volunteers and started beating the Jathas mercilessly under the personal supervision of S.G.M. Beaty, D.S.P. Amritsar. But the Sikhs were undeterred and the tidal upsurge of the masses was not to be stemmed. The violent use of force on the non-violent Akalis had great impact in and outside the Punjab. The Government brutality was condemned and the sight "of the hundreds of Chrits" being crucified won the applause of the national leaders. C.F. Andrews, in his eyewitness account, exposed the brazen-faced policy of the Government. He wrote that the Akalis were undergoing their baptism of fire and they cried to God for help, out of depths of their agony of 

of spirit. The police beat the Akalis with iron-tipped rods and batons, till blood began to flow and the brave Sikhs fell unconscious. M.R. Jayakar rightly wrote that it "was a new heroism steeled by suffering, a war of spirit."

The insults heaped upon the Akalis were unbearable. They were given inhuman punishments and their religious symbols were desecrated and hair were pulled out. Though the Panjab Government extricated itself with the help of Sir Ganga Ram but its effect on thousands of the Sikhs was tremendous. The religious fervour of the Akalis was at its highest pitch. They were seething with wrath and hatred against the British rulers and lost all faith in non-violence. It is not surprising that a large number of the Akalis who took part in the Guru Ka Bagh Morcha either joined the Babbar Akali Jatha or worked actively to help the Babbars. It created maximum resentment among the Sikhs of the Doab who still cherished the memories of the courage and bravery of the Ghadrites. In fact, they ridiculed the policy

of passive resistance.\textsuperscript{67} When the Guru Ka Bagh Morcha was in full swing in September 1922, Jathedar Kishan Singh Gargaj sent a letter to the then S.O.P.C. Secretary, Bhagat Jaswant Singh and urged upon him the necessity to make recourse to the sword.\textsuperscript{68} No doubt, the Babbar Akali movement took its final shape during this Morcha\textsuperscript{69} and those who could not stomach the discipline of Satyagraha took to dynamite, bomb and pistol and became the Babbar Akalis.\textsuperscript{70} The atrocities inflamed the Sikh passion for revenge and no true disciple of Guru Gobind Singh could remain loyal to the British after witnessing these atrocities.\textsuperscript{71}

The role of the toadies further exasperated the Sikhs and they began to discuss the futility of non-violence.\textsuperscript{72} Thus a few Akalis who had actively participated in the Gurdwara Reform Movement and had lent a helping hand, became the Babbar Akalis.\textsuperscript{73} The Gurdwara Reform movement had attracted the Sikhs of all shades. Infact, the struggle to liberate the Gurdwaras from the clutches of the Mahants was considered the first step towards the liberation of the country. No wonder, it included the ex-Ghadrites, Congress workers, ex-soldiers as well as active

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{67} Perti, R.K., \textit{Journal of Indian History}, Vol.I, Part II, p.496.
\item \textsuperscript{68} \textit{Paper Book Babbar Akali Conspiracy Case}, pp.77-79.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Josh, Sohan Singh, \textit{Akali Merchian Da Ithas}, op.cit., p.8.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Gulati, K.C., \textit{The Akalis: Past and Present}, Delhi,1974, p.1.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Niranjan Singh, \textit{Gora Sahi Jakhbar}, (Mss-proscribed), p.3.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Ibid., p.158.
\item \textsuperscript{73} The Tribune, Lahore, 24th October,1924.
\end{itemize}
soldiers. All those Akalis who regarded the policy of courting arrests and undergoing inhuman punishments as cowardice, became Chakarvartis. They formed the core of the Babbar Akalis. The policy of repression and suppression followed by the Government was largely responsible for the emergence of the Babbar Akalis. Even the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee admitted in one of its Declarations that sincere Akalis were compelled to adopt this course as a result of repressive policy of the government. The atrocities perpetrated during the Guru Ka Bagh morcha amply bore this out, with the result that the radicals openly advocated the wielding of the sword. The harsh and brutal treatment meted out to the Akalis in jails further aggravated their wrath. No doubt, the wave of uninterrupted atrocities on their brethren since the pre-Gurdwara reform days and the cruel beatings in Guru Ka Bagh morcha and the atrocities committed in Attock jail prompted sincere Akalis to take to violent activities. Some quarters attribute the fomentation at the Babbar Akalis to the factors other than the Gurdwara Reform movement. This is only partially correct. One such factor was the Chad movement. The emergence of the Babbar Akalis was thought to be the result of resuscitation of the militant spirit of the Chadrites which was fairly widespread in the Doab. They were alleged to have contacts with the Trans-Frontier revolutionaries as well. The fighting nature of the Sikhs, the


75. Ibid. p.257 (He has quoted the S.G.P.C. Declaration No.494 of April 24, 1923) Also vide Home-Political File No.25, 1923.
the experience of the Ghadr campaign of 1915 and the fanaticism which the cause of the Gurdwara Reform evoked had already warned the authorities of the possibilities of the outrage. It was believed that they received large sums of money for revolutionary propaganda from their counterparts still in America and Canada. Some of the returned emigrants who took part in the Gurdwara Reform movement realised the futility of non-violence and they urged the Akalis to resort to arms. Like Ghadrites, they used 0.32 calibre revolvers and Mauser pistols and brought out a newspaper to propagate their views effectively. Even their modus operandi bore close resemblance with that of the Ghadrites. Some of the returned emigrants like Karam Singh of Daulatpur, Karan Singh of Jhangar and Assa Singh of Phakrudi who first joined Congress Party, were soon involved in the Gurdwara Reform movement.

No doubt, some of the ex-Ghadrites turned out to be the leaders of the Babbar Akali Jatha. Even Sir Michael O'Dwyer, considered those Ghadrites, the nucleus of the new revolutionary movement of the Akali Sikhs. The basis of

77. The Civil and Military Gazette, 5th October, 1923.
80. O'Dwyer, Sir Michael, India as I Knew it, op.cit., p.209.
the struggle was inherent in the Doaba. Their limited holdings forced them to try their luck elsewhere; some went to foreign lands but the humiliation suffered by them at the hands of the foreign master had led them to think of complete liberation from the foreign yoke. Back home, they were interned within the limits of their villages. When the Gurdwara Reform movement started they became enthusiastically active. Revolutionary activity was the need of the hour and the presence of a large number of emigrants from Canada, in the Doab, whose enthusiasm had not yet languished, gave new colour to the Akali movement. It may be pertinent to point out that these ex-Ghadrites first joined the Congress Party. Some of them like Karam Singh Jhingar, Baba Karam Singh Chima and Bhag Singh Canadian were members of the Executive Committee, District Jullundur. Assa Singh and Karam Singh of Daulatpur were members of the Executive Committee of the District Congress, Rohtak. When the movement for the reformation of the Gurdwaras was started, they plunged into the struggle. Bhag Singh Canadian, Karam Singh Jhingar, Karam Singh of Daulatpur and Assa Singh of Phakrudi arranged divane and conference in Jullundur and Rohtakpur districts. They were a force to reckon within the Akali Dal. It will be of interest to mention that the General Meeting of the Akali Dal, held on 27th August, 1922 at Akal Takhat was presided over by Piara Singh Langari, another ex-Ghadrite. Soon, some of them felt disgusted with

82. Register Karwal Akali Dal, p.47.
the policy of the passive resistance adopted by the Congress and subsequently followed by the Akali Dal. They took to arms and became an integral part of the Babbar Akali Jatha, under Jathedar Kishan Singh Gargaj. The atrocities at Nankana Sahib and Guru Ka Bagh led them to resemble and reorganise themselves with a view to continuing the work of 1914-15 revolutionaries.Quite rightly, the Gurdwara Reform movement was the only ventilator available to them through which they expressed their piled up indignation.

It may be emphasized that their indignation stemmed from personal reasons as well. Karam Singh Jhirar was one of the passengers of Koma Gata Maru along with Baba Gurdit Singh. The volley of insults and indignities heaped upon them glowed like burning coal and could not be easily forgotten. Besides, all the emigrants were rendered penniless. Thus the economic factor was surely one of the causes which turned them hostile against the government. In the case study of the revolutionaries, one is tempted to conclude that they start from their own concern and work outwards rather than start from the national needs and work inwards. It is also significant that the demobilization and dismissal of the soldiers also added, in no small measure to their simmering

84. Datta, V.N., Madan Lal Dhingra, Delhi, 1978, p. 84.
discontentment because thus rendered unemployed and having nothing much to depend upon, they began to seeth with revenge. 85 This also told upon the morale of the serving soldiers. There was little surprise then that a large number of the accused in the Babbar Akali cases and most of the approvers had served at the time or the other in the army. Some of them like Ganga Singh, Naik (accused No.62) and Partap Singh (accused No.63) were arrested while serving in 52nd Sikh Regiment. 86

The soldiers who had shed their blood and won victory for their rulers were dismayed when they were not allowed to wear their religious emblems like kirpan and black turbans and were being court-martialled and discharged on flimsy grounds, a wave of righteous indignation spread among them and their blood began to boil. Their participation in the Gurdwara Reform movement too gave it a new dimension. It accounted for their overwhelming numbers in the Babbar Akali Jatha Doaba. The official record showed that the number of the Babbar Akalis who had served in the army and were involved in the conspiracy cases was not fewer than 54. 87

The political climate of the country too played its role in fomenting the revolutionary activities of the Akalis.

85. Milkha Singh, Babbar Akali Sangarsh (MSS, )p.17
86. Babbar Akali Conspiracy, Judgement, 1925, p.2.
87. Home-Political, File No.20C/1926, p.34.
It was very much there in the background. The people were already unhappy at the passage of the Rowlatt Bill. They were becoming more violent in their utterances, more extravagant in their hopes, more clamorous in their demands and more hostile to the administration. Lala Duni Chand made it clear to the Viceroy in the Panjab Provincial Congress Session in 1918, held at Amritsar that their cup of disappointment and discontent was full to the brim. Sir, Michael O'Dwyer, the Lieutenant Governor of the Panjab, who was known for his iron-hand approach, resorted with martial law and summary justice. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre resulted in 381 deaths and it created a river of blood between the people of India and their British rulers. The relationship between them could never again be what it was before 1918. This whipped up anti-British feeling. When the custodians and the pujaries of the Golden Temple honoured the butchers who had perpetrated the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the entire Sikh community was cut to the quick. When the Indian National Congress was struggling to get their political rights, the Sikhs thought of emancipating their Gurdwaras. Undoubtedly,

89. Ibid, p.899.
91. Raja Pam, The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, Chandigarh,1969, p.174. The real number will never be known accurately. Rupert Furneaux in his book Massacre at Amritsar, p.24 gives the official estimate of 1200 per one wounded whereas Ravi Rejmitt, Ludhiana, in its issue of May 1983 gave the number to be 1302 out of whom not less than 799 were the Sikhs.
the political situation prepared the ground for the coming struggle of the Sikhs against the government. All those Sikhs who were imbued with religious fervour, whether they were ex-Ghadrite leaders like S. Karam Singh of Daulatpur, S. Piara Singh of Langeri and S. Karam Singh of Jhingar or Congress workers like S. Chattar Singh of Kandhola and Dharma Singh of Behbalpur or active soldiers as well as ex-soldiers, like S. Kishan Singh Gargaj and S. Amr Singh of Dhariwal, jumped into the fray. After the Nankana carnage the weak-kneed policy of the Akali Dal and the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, compelled them to launch the Babbar Akali movement. Thus, it was a militant part of the general Akali movement, which aimed at the reform of the Gurdwaras, free from the direct or indirect control of the government. All those who did not subscribe to the policy of non-violence or were disillusioned with it after the failure of non-cooperation movement, more so with its withdrawal by Gandhiji after the Chaura-chauri incident, came into the fold of the Babbar Akalis.

The Sikhs who had taken part either in the Ghadr movement or later in the Indian National Congress were drawn to the Gurdwara Reform movement, due to their ardent love for religion and fervour for reform. It was the arena of the Gurdwara Reform movement which impelled them to organise

93. Vide Interview of Pandit Durga Dass, Editor Urdu Weekly, Peigm-e-Watan, and Manager Bari Doab Bank and Ex-General Secretary Congress Committee, Bhiaripur (1921-30) told the writer that Dharma Singh Behbalpur was the General Secretary of his village Congress Committee.


Chakravarti Jathas, later to be called the Babbar Akali Jatha. Even some of the living Babbars concede that the atrocities at Nankana and Guru Ka Bagh turned them into militants.

If some of the Babbars had Ghadrite antecedents there is no reason to link it in entirety with the Ghadr movement as such.96

The Babbar Akali movement was, in fact a Sikh movement in its inception and was the direct outcome of that religious zeal and passion which was ebullient to see the Gurdwaras liberated as earlier as possible. Even the Ghadr movement was the outcome of the Sikh ethos. It was, almost a Sikh movement.97

Bhai Randhir Singh, stalwart of the Ghadr movement, himself conceded that the demolition of the wall of Gurdwara Rikab Ganj roused the ire of the Sikhs and the maltreatment of Koma Gata Maru Sikhs added insult to the injury.98 He himself

f.n.95 contd:


96. Bami, M.L., Indian Martyrs, New Delhi, 1977, p.49. S. Kartar Singh of Pindori Mijran in his interview on 9th September, 1983, S. Surain Singh of Daulatpur in his statement on September 26, 1983 and Bhagat Singh Bilga, Secretary, D.B.Y.L., Jullundur vide his interview to the writer on 10th December, 1982, expressed the view that Babbars were inspired by the Ghadr movement. Despite this, the fact remains that a section of the Akalis thought of violent means only when Nankana Carnage had taken place.


took part in an unsuccessful attempt to attack Ferozepur Fort on November 27, 1914 and was consequently arrested on May 9, 1915 and was gaol ed for a long term of imprisonment till October 4, 1930, u/s 121(a) of Indian Penal Code in the Second Lahore Conspiracy Case. He called himself as the first prisoner of the Akali movement who fought for the Sikh right to lead life in the jail as prescribed by the Guru himself. Others like Baba Midhan Singh of Chugha of District Ferozepur, Udham Singh of Kasel and Baba Wasakha Singh of Dadher of District Amritsar were of that tribe of adventurous heroes who combined religious fervour with radical politics and defied death with supreme scorn and courage. Those Ghadrites who remained outside the jail, like Karam Singh of Jhangar, S. Karam Singh of Daulatpur and S. Assa Singh of Phakrud first joined the Indian National Congress but after the Nankana tragedy they took prominent part in the Gurdwara Reform movement. Subsequently, they became top-ranking members of the Babbar Akali Jatha. To conclude, it was the Gurdwara Reform Movement which might be considered to have been grown out of the Singh Sabha and the Ghadr movements and not the Babbar Akali movement. It was the Gurdwara Reform movement which, in fact, proved a fertile soil for the formation of the terrorist groups, leading to the birth of the Babbar Akali movement in the Doaba.

The genesis of the Babbar Akali movement can be comprehended only if it is viewed as a resurgence of the Sikh spirit exhibited by the martyrs in the eighteenth century. The Gurdwara Reform movement was also a revival of that spirit and the Babbar movement was not only a continuum of it but also an efflorescence of the Sikh militancy. A brief survey of the Akalis right from the time of Guru Gobind Singh unto the present day will indubitably make us understand the Babbar Akalis from a correct historical perspective. Akali is one who is a worshipper of Akal and all those who like lotus are above mundane life and live according to the will of supreme God and form the vanguard of the Gurdwaras, came to be called the Akalis. The Akalis and Nihangs are synonyms and Guru Gobind Singh used Nihangs and Waris (Brave) in the one and the same sense in 'Chandi di Var'.

The sect of the Akalis differs from all other Sikh orders in being a militant organisation. In their military capacity the Akalis were called 'Nihangs' and they played a considerable part in the Sikh history. They combined warlike activity with the relinquishment of the world and became the armed guardians of Amritsar. They alone among the Sikhs continued to wear blue chequered robes and steel bracelets ordained by Guru Gobind Singh. During the Sikh rule they

challenged all those who showed laxity in religious affairs and even Ranjit Singh was reprimanded for his moral depravity. During the British period, the outrages committed by the priests or the pujaris within the Sikh shrines incurred the wrath of the Sikh community. Its newly awakened spirit found expression in a cult essentially reminiscent of the Khalsa's militant past.

Thus appeared the political Akali on the stage of the Sikh national drama. Though the word 'Akali' lost its original significance to the general public it conveyed little meaning beyond membership of the Akali Dal, yet its inward inspiration was religious zeal. All those in the vanguard of the Sikh struggle for reform in Gurdwaras came to be called Akalis.

Those Akalis who advocated the use of weapons in defiance of the official Akali policy of non-violence came to be called brave (Waryam) or the Babbar Akalis. They followed the tradition laid down by the Tenth Guru and strongly believed that, "when all other means have failed, it is lawful to have recourse to arms". They were as religious as the Akalis though the Government doubted that they had any genuine interest in the religious side of the Akali movement. They differed markedly from the Akalis in one respect. They came out openly against the Government, made seditious speeches, threatened


violent actions and became 'Chakarvartis' to avoid apprehension. Soon, they organised themselves into a group in the Doaba Bist Jullundur. Some places become so fused with the events taking place in them that their very names are charged with special significance. Quite rightly, the Doaba came to be associated with the Babbar Akali movement. Thus, the Babbar Akali movement which appeared on the scene in the Doaba was the outcome of the Gurdwara Reform movement. 108


It has been incorrectly mentioned therein that the Babbar Akali Jatha was a political wing of the Akalis and remained active during the World War I. In fact, the Babbar Akali movement took shape only after the Nankana tragedy.