

Historiographical Perspectives on the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee

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ABSTRACT

The Akali struggle from 1920 to 1925 was the result of the formation of Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). The SGPC is known as the 'parliament of Sikhs'. The SGPC has occupied a very important place in the Sikh history as well as in the regional and national history. A good number of scholars, at various points of time, have discussed and tried to analyze the formation and working of the SGPC. They have explained its evolution and transition through various phases. Herein, most of the available works on this arena are summarized to review the birth and genesis of the SGPC, the Gurdwara Reform Movement, Gurdwara Act of 1925 and early stage of the SGPC written by different authors in English and Punjabi.

Keywords: *Sikh, the SGPC, Gurdwara, Akali.*

Objective

The purpose of the present study is to shed light on the different sources, facts and information about the SGPC. It provides valuable information on different historical works of various well known historians and scholars on the SGPC and the Shiromani Akali Dal. Another objective is to highlight different spheres of the working SGPC which include religious, political, economic and social. This compilation would be helpful to the researchers working on the SGPC and the Shiromani Akali Dal in particular and Sikh politics in general.

Introduction

A brief information about the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) seems to be appropriate before going into discussion about the topic. The establishment of the SGPC proved to be a turning point in the history of the Sikhs. It

was the result of the Gurdwara Reform Movement (1920-1925). It was the largest and longest mass protest against the *mahants* and colonial rule in India in general and the Punjab in specific. This movement was essentially inspired by social, religious and political awakening among the Sikhs. The successful agitation compelled the British Government to legislate for the management of the Sikh Gurdwaras. The uniqueness of a religious body formed with a legislative act gave the SGPC an edge in its functioning and legitimacy to its peaceful action programme. The SGPC with its military wing, the Shiromani Akali Dal became a strong nucleus of the social, religious and political activities that was to play a decisive role subsequently in the history of the Punjab. The SGPC created a middle class Sikh leadership, which could act on the larger issues and bring the community into mainstream of national life.¹

History is a study of facts, their analysis and interpretation, which consists of a corpus of ascertained facts. These are historical sources which lead to the establishment of historical facts.² The sources for the study are primary and secondary. Primary sources are first hand evidences of events, whereas secondary works are accounts built upon the primary evidences. Most of the historical accounts fall into the second category. The primary source is the raw material, more meaningful to the expert historian than to the laymen. The secondary sources like articles, dissertations or books are the coherent works of the history.³ There are various books on the SGPC, written by different others in English and Punjabi. The historiographical aspect of the SGPC is presented in detail in the following section.

Discussion

Teja Singh's *Gurdwara Reform Movement and the Sikh Awakening* was an eye witness account of the Gurdwara Reform Movement. The author was a participant in the Movement. However, the work concentrates only on the early stages of the Akali Movement. The work was first published in 1922. It covers different aspects of the Sikh organization and Sikh shrines. The author also throws light on different issues related to the Gurdwara Reform Movement, particularly the need of reforms, the genesis of reforms, political awakening among the Sikhs and

the Gurdwara Bill. The author said that the British Government had begun to interfere with the inviolable religious rites and rituals of the Sikhs. The struggle for the reform in the management of the Gurdwara has been labeled as the Akali Movement.⁴

Ruchi Ram Sahni's *Struggle for Reform in Sikh Shrines* provides the firsthand account of the Akali Movement. He has made good use of the contemporary literature available to him. The work provides insight into early stages of the Gurdwara Reform Movement. The work has a deep bearing on the Sikhs and their traditions and covering aspects such as the place of Gurdwaras in Sikh history, early Sikh movements, Sikh culture, Sikh polity and other important persons and Sikh institutions. It has been aptly pointed out how the Akalis strengthened the forces of nationalism by fighting for the liberation of their motherland.⁵

Ganda Singh's *Confidential Papers of the Akali Movement* is a compilation of government and personal documents and records also falls in this category. It covers the period of the Akali Movement. It studies the evolving Akali ideology during the Gurdwara Reform Movement and the process of image building of the new Akali leadership, the response of the British to the newly emerging Akali thinking, the different groups in the Sikh community and many other relevant facts pertaining to the reform movement from the body of confidential papers.⁶

Khushwant Singh's *History of the Sikhs, Vol. 2* is an important work containing rich material collected from archival sources, government records and private documents related to the period under study. It is a balanced, logical and a bias less interpretation of the events. Making an adequate and judicious use of relevant source materials, the author has written in a straightforward manner, with a great clarity and brevity. Three chapters Religious Movement, Singh Sabha and Social Reform and the Akali Immortals give information about the SGPC. They are comprehensive in scope. The author says that during the five years struggle of the Akalis for the Gurdwara Reform Movement, the SGPC became a sort of parliament of the Sikhs; its decision acquired the sanctity of the ancient *gurumatta*; the Shiromani Akali Dal became its army; and the income from the Gurdwaras gave its financial sustenance. Its control became the focal point of the Sikh politics.⁷

Sohan Singh Josh's *Akali Morchian-Da-Itihas* provides useful insights into the dominant ideas, movement and value-profile of the period under study. This work is in Punjabi. It concentrates mainly on the Akali struggle for reform in the Sikh shrines and how the Akalis widened the scope of their activities by entering the political arena, how they eventually attracted the attention of the national leaders and soon became an important factor in the struggle against British imperialism. The author says that the Akalis became the voice of the people for liberation of Gurdwaras and national independence; it revolutionized the social, political and cultural life of the Sikhs.⁸

Jaswant Singh-edited Master Tara Singh's papers entitled *Master Tara Singh :Jiwan Sangharash te Udesh*, includes autobiographical writings of Master Tara Singh. It is also in Punjabi language. The papers are extremely rich and provide invaluable source of information. He has considerably depended upon an analysis of these papers which have been extremely useful in understanding the politics of that period dominated by Master Tara Singh.⁹

Mohinder Singh's *The Akali Movement* is one of the detailed studies of the five year period of the Akali Movement (1920-1925) a revised version of the author's doctoral thesis from the University of Delhi. It was first published in 1978 and its revised version in 1997. It is study of the five year period of Akali Movement (1920-1925). The work tries to explain the essentially non-violent nature of the Akali struggle. The author focuses on the political aspect of the movement, along with its contribution towards religious reforms. The author has used rare and hitherto less tapped sources in both India and the United Kingdom. The work has been divided into eight chapters. The first chapter deals with origin and evolution of the institution of Gurdwaras and the historical background of the Akali Movement in brief. The second and third chapters trace the Akali struggle for reform in the Sikh shrines. The fourth and fifth chapters deal with widen of the scope of struggle. The role of the Babbar Akalis has been studied in the sixth chapter. The seventh chapter studies the government's policy with regard to legislative measures for the control of the Sikh shrines. In last chapter, the author makes a final assessment of the

movement, its impact on contemporary Punjab politics, the Akali-Congress relationship and the future trends in Sikh politics.¹⁰

K.L. Tuteja's *Sikh Politics 1920-40* concentrates more on the politics of the Congress and its relations with the Sikhs. It discusses how the leadership in the Gurdwara Reform Movement was responsible for bringing the Akalis close to the Congress. It is a useful study for understanding the relationship between the two which had deep impact on the politics of Punjab. It analyses the growth of Sikh politics in Punjab and explains why and how the Sikhs took to politics. The study is quite useful as it provides an analytical background of Punjab politics in pre-partition Punjab. The author describes the formation of the SGPC. In the beginning it was controlled by moderate Sikhs then it came in the hands of the nationalist Sikh leaders. He talks about the Sikhs, the SGPC and the Gurdwara Reform Movement from a national point of view.¹¹

M.L. Ahluwalia's *Gurdwara Reform Movement* deals with the origin and evolution of the Akalis and the British official view about Sikh politics. The author gives information about Akali agitation, permanent Gurdwara law, Gurdwara Bill and Gurdwara Act of 1925. The work contains a complete set of relevant documents on the subject. These include official records, reports, correspondence and speeches of leading personalities. All this documentation aims at providing the reader full and comprehensive view of this Movement.¹²

Richard G. Fox in *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making* analyses the empirical situation in which the Gurdwara Reform Movement was launched and its impact upon the Sikh culture. He argues that material conditions and cultural meanings combined to determine that ground reality. The Sikh identity provided cultural meanings to the reform movement while British orientations and politics created the material conditions. The study is an important one but is confined to the reform period only.¹³

J.S. Grewal's *The Akalis: A Short History* is another important work by a renowned historian of the Sikhs. It is a thorough and systematic work on the Akali politics, covering different stages from the emergence of the Akalis upto 1995. According to author the Akalis were obliged to mobilize their moral, physical and

organizational resources, met the challenges and won decisive battle for legislation on Gurdwaras, making the SGPC a central statutory body for the control and management of all historic Gurdwaras in the Punjab. Thereafter the Akalis took over the control of the SGPC and the Gurudwaras which they never relinquished afterwards. The Akalis anxiously participated in the struggle for freedom to maintain the unity and integrity of India and later in independent India, they struggled hard for safeguarding the political, social and cultural interests of the Sikhs. The history of the Akalis during the last seventy five years has been marked by ups and downs.¹⁴

Shamsher Singh Ashok's *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee Da Punjab Sala Ithias (1926-1976)* is another important work in Punjabi. It is one of the earliest works to use the SGPC sources. It is a relevant source for the study of area under study as it contains the original proceedings. It provides important information regarding various resolutions of the SGPC, which were passed in general meetings and executive committee meetings. It throws light on the elections, names of the presidents, vice-presidents and members of the SGPC in various years. It is a good source as the author has compiled the proceedings of the annual and general meetings.¹⁵

Sukhmani Bal Riar's *The Politics and History of the Central Sikh League 1919-1929* though mostly deals with the origin and evaluation of the Central Sikh League, it has also dealt with the Gurdwara reform movement. It provides not only reasonable but also valuable information on the origin of the SGPC from the point of the view of the Central Sikh League. She has extensively used government and non-government sources in this work. A noteworthy feature of this work is the attention which is rightly focused on the political aspect of the movement along with its contribution towards religious reform.¹⁶

Kashmir Singh's *Law of Religious Institution Sikh Gurdwara*¹⁷ and Navikran Singh's *The Sikh Gurdwaras Act 8 of 1925*¹⁸ offer important information of the Gurdwara Act VIII of 1925. These two books are valuable and important sources of the Gurdwaras Act of 1925. These books provide information about control of the SGPC over Sikh Gurdwaras, the board, qualification of elected and nominated members, elections, terms of boards, meetings, office bearers, committees of

Gurdwara, executive of board, power and duties of committees and finances. The Gurdwara Bill became an Act (Act VIIIth of 1925) on 28th July, 1925. The Act provided for control of all historic shrines by the elected body called the SGPC. Satwinder Singh's *S.G.P.C. Elections and the Sikh Politics* is a recent study. The work provides information on the SGPC elections. It talks about the process of elections in the SGPC, the rise and fall of the Sikh leadership vis-à-vis their influence in the SGPC. It also points towards the maladies that have crept into the SGPC elections.¹⁹

Harjinder Singh Dilgeer's *The Sikh Reference Book* is a comprehensive reference book on Sikhism. It covers all aspects of Sikhism like the Sikh culture, literature, Sikh polity, theology, Gurus and other important persons and institutions. It also throws light on the brief history of Akalis, the Shiromani Akali Dal and the SGPC.²⁰ Ramesh Chander Dogra and Urmila Dogra's *The Sikh World: An Encyclopaedic Survey of Sikh Religion and Culture* does not pretend to cover everything available at their disposal. It is a reference book covering religion, history, society, castes, culture, tribes and political affairs of the Sikhs. These are interesting entries on Sikh value system and Sikh way of life. This book also gives information about Gurudwars, Gurdwara Act of 1925, Gurdwara income, the Gurdwara Reform Movement, Sikh shrines and the SGPC.²¹

H.S. Bhatia and S.R. Bakshi's *Encyclopaedic History of the Sikhs and Sikhism, Vol. 5* deals with various phases of Sikh politics in Punjab and their role in the freedom struggle. Some of the issues mentioned in the volume clearly show the spirit of dedication and sacrifice among the Sikhs. The role of the Akalis in numerous movements has been highlighted. The volume has a deep bearing on the Sikhs and their traditions, early Sikh, Guru-Ka-Bagh *morcha* and the role of the Akalis, the tragedy at Nankana Sahib, the details of massacre, Gandhi's speech at Nankana Sahib, Sunder Singh Majithia's confidential note, the details of the Akali Movement, at Jaito *morcha*, role of *Jathas*, Shahid Ganj Gurdwara movement and Central Sikh League. We can get valuable information about the formation of SGPC and the Shiromani Akali Dal.²²

H.S. Singha's *Encyclopedia of Sikhism* has over one thousand entries about Sikh Gurus, martyrs, heroes, places of worship, religious centers, traditions, theological concepts and ethical principles. It is a popular reference book for the students of Sikhism. This work also gives brief information on Akali movement, Akal Takht, Gurdwaras and Gurdwara Act.²³ Ramesh Chander Dogra and Gobind Singh's *Encyclopedia of Sikh Religion and Culture* includes information on all major and minor aspects of religion, culture, history, tribes, castes, folklore, customs, fairs and festivals of the Sikhs. We can get brief, rare and important information under the titles of Akali, Akali Dal, Gurdwara Reform Movement and Guru-Ka-Bagh *morcha* 1922 from it. This work deals with the origin of Akalis. The Akalis differ from all the other orders in being a militant organization. It describes that the Shiromani Akali Dal is a politico-religious party of a section of the Sikhs. It gives rare and brief information about the SGPC.²⁴

Another category of works, comprise recent articles published in various journals. These articles are written by different authors under various titles like the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Akali Movement, Gurdwara Reform Movement, Gurdwara and the Shiromani Akali Dal. S.N. Joshi's *Origin of the Akalis* deals with the origin and background of the Akalis. The word 'Akali' which has later been adopted by one political party is closely linked with the development of the Sikh history. The agitation launched in 1920 for the reformation of the Gurdwaras has been popularly known as the Akali movement and party established by Shiromani Akali Dal. All people called it '*Akali*' but their foundation is ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh himself. Akali is immortal and said to be derived from *Akal Purusha*. In their military capacity, the Akalis were called '*Nihangs*' as reckless and played, a considerable part in Sikh history. The Akalis had emerged as role representatives of Sikh sentiments and aspirations.²⁵

Balbir Singh's *Akali Movement and Oral Evidence* is an important article. This paper aims at high lighting the different stages of the Akali Movement bearing evidence on the statements of all those who either participated in the movement or witnessed it as its contemporaries. The statements of Bhai Jodh Singh, Giani Bachan Singh, S. Ujjal Singh, S. Amar Singh, *Jathedar* Sohan Singh, Giani Gurmukh Singh

Mussafir and Giani Ram Singh Grewal throw flood of light on the Akali Movement. We can very well conclude that the oral evidence can be corroborated with the published versions to make the events more authentic and reliable oral evidences and written statements are supplementary to each other and it is only by consulting such diverse sources that we can go near the historical truth.²⁶ Gursharan Singh's *The Akali Movement in Jind State* throws light on the Akali Movement in the Jind State. The Akali Movement had its birth in the growing discontentment among the Sikhs. The discontent emanated from a foreign rule which was indifferent and callous. The Princely State of Jind, like most of its counterparts, was a rule of unchallenged despotism. The Government in this state could not adjust itself to the changed definition of legitimate demands and the fundamental rights of the public. The theory of divine right had not vanished. Ethnically, culturally and religiously, people in the Jind State were in no way much different from those of the Punjab during the period of freedom movement of India. Consequently, the Akali Movement in the British Punjab slowly moved towards Malwa from Majha in 1921. This article covers many aspects of the Akali Movement in the Jind State.²⁷

K.L. Tuteja's *The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and the First Non-Co-operation Movement* discusses how the leadership in the Gurdwara Reform Movement was responsible for bringing the SGPC close to the Indian National Congress and consequently joining the Non Co-operation Movement. This article has been divided into sections. The first section describes the formation of SGPC. It also covers the issue of Non Co-operation and resolution of Gurdwara Bill. The second section brings out that the nationalist Sikh leaders wanted a platform through which all section of Sikh community could be appealed. The third section deals with the relations between the SGPC and the Akalis. Under the leadership of Baba Kharak Singh, the SGPC was in close touch with the Congress. On the other hand, Congress leaders were also taking an interest in activities of the Sikhs. For them the Gurdwara Reform Movement was also a part of the national struggle. The SGPC had joined the Non Co-operation Movement with different objects. In its initial stage the SGPC resolved to boycott liquor and British goods and to constitute *panchayats*, but it did not suggest any boycott of schools, courts and titles. The

Government alleged that the Sikhs under Baba Kharak Singh were planning to take possession of the treasury of the Golden Temple for political purposes. Thus, the Deputy Commissioner, Amritsar, took away the keys of the Golden Temple from the Akalis.²⁸

Mohinder Singh's *Akali Struggle Past and Present* focuses on the political aspect of the movement, along with its contribution towards religious reforms. In recent times it were the Akalis, who during their peaceful struggle for Gurdwara reforms were able to demonstrate the efficacy of non-violence weapon of peaceful *satyagraha* through their passive sufferings at Nankana Sahib, Guru Ka Bagh and other centres. It shows how the Akali leaders in the past succeeded in channeling the popular religious upsurge into a powerful instrument for India's struggle for freedom. It gives good insights into all phases and aspects of the movement. It has been aptly pointed out how the Akalis strengthened the forces of nationalism by first fighting for the liberation of their shins and then for the liberation of their motherland.²⁹ Bhai Aridhaman Singh Jhubal and Jaswinder Kaur Dhillon's "*Liberation of Gurdwara Nankana Sahib*" gives information about history of the *morcha* of Nankana Sahib and particularly Nankana Sahib Massacre.³⁰

Conclusion

The formation of SGPC was turning point in the Sikh history. With the passage of time, the SGPC became a nucleus of the social, religious and political activities that was to play a decisive role subsequently in the history of the Punjab. Although, it is a very significant institution of the Sikhs, it has not been given due attention by the scholars. Most of the studies have focused on the Gurdwara Reform Movement, Sikh politics, Akali politics, Akali-Congress relations and the role of Sikhs in anti-imperialist movement, but no exclusive study has been performed on the SGPC. The prominent work given to the SGPC was the management of the Gurdwaras. Since its formation, the management of many historical and important Gurdwaras is under the control of the SGPC. Gurdwaras are premier institutions of the Sikh religion for the propagation of Sikhism and other works for welfare of the mankind. The control of their management provides a pivotal role to the SGPC. It

endowed with the SGPC a capacity to play not only vital role in the religious but also in socio-cultural, economic and political sphere in Sikh religion. The present compilation would be helpful to researchers who want to work on the SGPC, the Shiromani Akali Dal and Sikh history. The researchers must focus on different aspects of the SGPC before and after Independence, which were not highlighted by these authors. Various unexplored aspects of the SGPC could still be explored.

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