
UNIT 19 THE AKALI MOVEMENT

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19.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit will deal with the social reform movements among the Sikhs, particularly the Akali Movement. This movement brought about a distinct change in the social and intellectual attitude of the Sikh Community and fostered a nationalist spirit among them. After reading this Unit, you should be able to:

- know about the different reform movements that took place prior to the Akali Movement,
- explain the causes that gave rise to the Akali Movement,
- describe the course and main events of the Akali Movement, and
- know about the significance of the Gurudwara Bill in the Akali Movement.

19.1 INTRODUCTION

As you have already read in Unit 8, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a period of socio-religious awakening and reform in India. In social life these reforms attacked superstition and the traditional caste based divisions of society. These movements worked for the abolition of evil practices like Sati, female infanticide and child marriage. They advocated widow remarriage, equal rights for women and modern education. These reform movements mainly concentrated on the evils in Hindu society. At the same time, other communities like the Muslims and the Sikhs were also undergoing socio-religious changes.

The Sikh community which in some ways had deviated from the path shown by the Sikh Gurus also needed social and religious reforms. Since movements of socio-religious reform in the nineteenth century have already been discussed, this Unit will discuss, in detail, movements of socio-religious reform among the Sikhs with special reference to the Akali Movement which became a major force in changing the social outlook of the Sikh community and brought them in the mainstream of Indian nationalism. Before going into details of the Akali movement it will be relevant to study briefly other movements of socio-religious reform among the Sikhs which created necessary social awakening and led to the launching of the Akali struggle for Gurudwara reform.

19.2 SOCIAL EVILS IN SIKH SOCIETY AND EARLY REFORMS

As you might have read, Sikhism started as a movement of social protest against social evils such as discrimination in the name of caste, ritualism taking precedence over the true spirit of religion and the domination of the priestly classes through religion. Its founder, Guru Nanak Dev, believed in unity of the Godhead and the brotherhood of mankind. He condemned meaningless rites and rituals and preached belief in one God. Like other saints of medieval India, he laid emphasis on good actions and honest living. "Truth is high but higher still is truthful living", said Nanak. To put his teachings into practice Guru Nanak introduced the twin institutions of *Sangat*, congregation, and *Pangat*, eating food from the free community kitchen while sitting in one line. Guru Nanak also advocated equality for women. "Why degrade women who give birth to kings and greatmen", said Nanak. He preached against the different evils rampant in society and advocated the establishment of a just social order. However, these simple and practical teachings of Guru Nanak and of successive Sikh Gurus were not followed properly by the people. In due course Sikh religion was firmly established and developed its own rituals and institutions. The establishment of Sikh rule by Ranjit Singh resulted in the introduction of pomp and show in religious places, thus giving rise to the same social evils which the Sikh Gurus and other social reformers had condemned.

At the same time there arose a number of social and religious reform movements in the Sikh community. We will study a few important movements here.

19.2.1 The Nirankari Movement

Baba Dayal Dass, a saintly man and a contemporary of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, was the first among the reformers in Sikh religion, who had the courage to condemn the social evils that had gradually crept in Sikh society. Baba Dayal disapproved the worship of ~~torches and graves~~. He also introduced a simplified version of marriage named *Anand Karaj* (A joyous deed) which later got legal recognition with the passage of the Anand Marriage Act in 1909. Under this system, marriage is performed in the presence of the *Guru Granth*, with the priest singing four relevant hymns from this holy book of the Sikhs. No other rituals are performed and dowry, marriage procession, drinking and dancing are disapproved.

Baba Dayal died on 30th January 1855 and was succeeded by his son Baba Darbara Singh, who continued to propagate his father's teachings. Darbara Singh faced considerable opposition. The priests in charge of the Golden Temple did not allow him to enter the shrine and perform the rites of marriage according to *Anand Karaj* ceremony. After Baba Darbara Singh's death his brother Rattan Chand, popularly known as Baba Ratta Ji continued the work. It is interesting to note that in the earlier period, social reformers in Sikhism were not necessarily baptised Sikhs but the people who had great love and regard for the Sikh religion and its teachings. The movement is popularly known as the Nirankari (Formless God). Baba Dayal preached against idol worship of human gurus and expected his followers to believe in one formless God — *Japo Piaro Dhann Nirankar, Jo deh dhari sab Khuar* (All glory to the formless One, god corporeal you must shun).

19.2.2 The Namdhari Movement

The Namdhari movement, popularly known as the Kuka movement because of the followers resorting to shrieks (**Kukan**) while in ecstasy. Started by Bhagat Jawahar Mal and Baba Balak Singh, the movement became a powerful instrument of socio-religious awakening among the Sikhs under Baba Ram Singh. Ram Singh enjoined upon his followers the worship of one God through prayer and meditation. He advised his followers to be engaged at all times in the worship of God. He also preached against social evils such as the caste system, female infanticide, early marriage and barter of daughters in marriage. He also popularised simple and inexpensive Anand marriages. The teachings of Baba Ram Singh, had a wide appeal among the Sikh masses. Contemporary European officials viewed the growing popularity of Baba Ram Singh's mission with serious concern as is evident from the following account in the Parliamentary Papers of the government:

"...He (Ram Singh) abolishes all distinctions of caste among Sikhs; advocates indiscriminate marriages of all classes; enjoins the marriage of widows, all of which

he performs himself; he never takes alms himself and prohibits his followers from doing so, enjoins abstinence from liquors and drugs....he exhorts his disciples to be cleanly and truth-telling and it is well that every man carries his staff; and they all do. The Granth is their only accepted inspired volume. The brotherhood may be known by the tie of their turban — *sheedapug* — by a watch-word-by necklace of knots made in a white woollen cord, to repeat beads and which are worn by all the community”.

Though Baba Ram Singh’s mission was specially marked for its teachings of righteous living, toleration and mercy, some of his followers got out of control and, in a fit of religious frenzy, committed excesses which resulted in a clash with the Government. Some of his more fanatic followers who got excited over the killing of cows, murdered the butchers at Amritsar, Rajkot and Malerkotla. As a punishment, they were blown off from the cannon’s mouth. There is difference of opinion among the scholars as to whether the movement was social or political, but the official action against the Kukas definitely created great hatred for British rule in the minds of the people in Punjab. This helped in preparing the ground for the subsequent struggle of the Akalis in the early twentieth century.

19.2.3 The Singh Sabha Movement

The year following the persecution of the Kukas and the suppression of their movement saw the birth of the Singh Sabha (1873 A.D). The Singh Sabha movement and its activities had a much wider appeal among the Sikh masses and, consequently, made a far greater impact. The promoters of the Singh Sabha movement, most of whom belonged to the educated middle class, were connected with other socio-religious movements in Punjab as well. They also were aware of similar movements in other parts of the country. They believed that social evils among the Sikhs were due to lack of education among them. They thought that social and religious reform could be brought about only when the masses were made aware of their earlier heritage.

The Singh Sabha aimed mainly at social and religious reform through the spread of education and consciously refrained from discussing political questions or in any way incurring the displeasure of the British rulers.

The Singh Sabha leadership, who either because of their own vested interests as big land holders or because of their perception of the ‘interests of the Sikhs’ did not want to incur displeasure of the British rulers. The preachers of this movement, therefore, did not hold the British Government directly responsible for the manifold social and religious ills. However, it was difficult to totally dissociate the British Government from the deplorable state of affairs that was depicted by these preachers. While referring to the prosperous days of Ranjit Singh’s rule in Punjab, they compared the present degraded condition of the Sikhs with the past sufferings under the Mughals. It was suggested that this similarity in conditions under the Mughals and the British ‘was due to the similarity in causes’.

However, the major contribution of the Singh Sabha leadership lay in the creation of a network of Khalsa schools, colleges and other centres of learning. The Singh Sabha leaders felt that the spread of education among the Sikhs needed support from the British rulers. Therefore, they sought the patronage of the Viceroy and other British officials. Soon after the establishment of the Khalsa Diwan at Lahore, an active campaign was started for the foundation of a central college for the Sikhs around which was to be organised a system of schools in the outlying districts. Educational activities of the Singh Sabha received ready support and patronage from the Government of India and the British officials and the rulers of the Sikh princely states that the Khalsa College was founded at Amritsar in 1892.

Though the promoters of the Khalsa College and their British patrons founded the college for purely educational advancement, the students and some of the teachers there could not escape the influence of the prevailing political unrest in the province and the growing movement of nationalism in the country. The C.I.D. officials reported to the authorities that the Khalsa College had, by 1907, ‘become an important centre for inculcating national feelings among the students’. It was perhaps due to the influence of these politically conscious teachers and the inspiration of G.K. Gokhale, M.K. Gandhi and other nationalist leaders that the students demonstrated twice against the European officers who visited the college with a view to suggest certain measures to curb the growing nationalist feelings among the college students. Through the Sikh Education Conference, the Singh Sabha also

created a net work of Khalsa Schools which indirectly served as centres of social awakening and reform.

Movements of socio-religious reform among the Sikhs exposed the evils which had slowly crept into the Sikh social and religious life and indirectly inculcated in them a desire for reform. Growing political unrest in the Punjab in the early twentieth century, the influence of the nationalist press and above all the growing forces of nationalism in the country further added to the discontent among the Sikhs and prepared ground for the coming Akali struggle which was directed against the *Mahants* and other vested interests in Sikh shrines on the one hand and against British imperialism in the Punjab on the other. We will read about it in the next section.

Check Your Progress 1

1 List the main evils against which the Sikh Social Reformers fought.

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2 What is Anand Karai marriage? Who supported this form of marriage?

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3 What is the significance of Kuka Movement?

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4 What was the contribution of Singh Sabha Movement in the field of education?

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19.3 THE AKALI MOVEMENT

The Akali Movement was started by the Sikh reformers to purify their religious places by removal of the evil social practices that had slowly crept into them. The Sikh shrines, popularly known as the *Gurdwara* or *Dharamsal* were established by the Sikh Gurus as centres of religious activity and social and moral instruction, and for providing food and shelter to the poor and needy. The Sikh teaching of equality of mankind was practised here. All persons, irrespective of their caste, colour and sex could enter these places and share the free meal served in the *Langar* (Community Kitchen) attached to each *Gurdwara*. Contemporary writers mention that the Sikhs attached no importance to the monopoly of the Brahmins in social and religious matters. Men from all the four *varnas* freely entered the Sikh *Gurdwaras* and partook of the sacred *prasad* and free meal served in the *Langar*.

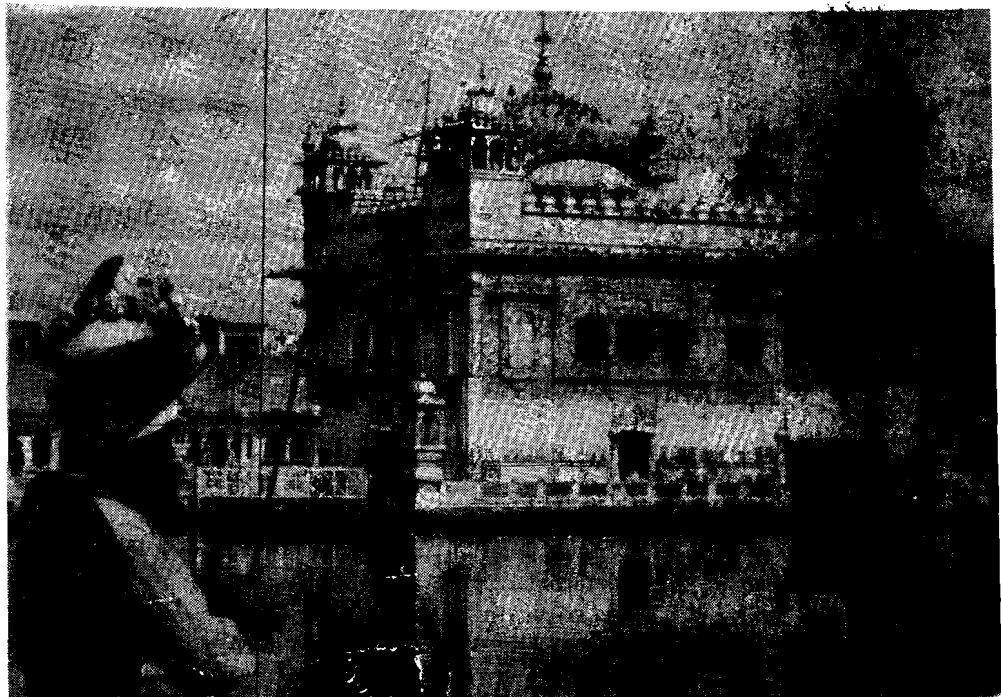
In keeping with the Sikh tradition of piety, those appointed in charge of the Gurdwaras did not look upon the offerings as their personal income but used them for running free community kitchen and other works of social welfare. During the days of Sikh persecution after the death of the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, control of the Sikh Gurdwaras passed on to the *Udasis* or those who professed Sikhism but did not strictly adhere to its outward symbols and could, thus, escape persecution. The *Udasis* in charge of various Gurdwaras at this time rendered an important service to the Sikh religion by keeping the Gurdwaras going. They were widely respected as men of high moral character and integrity. Most of them were not attached to any particular shrine or to its wealth and property but moved from place to place. There were, however, some who established regular institutions and admitted followers and came to be known as *Mahants*. In the earlier stages, these *Mahants* enjoyed the confidence and reverence of the congregation of their areas. They also followed the advice of Guru Nanak not to covet the offerings. But this tradition of purity and simplicity was given up by most of the *Mahants* as a result of the increase in their income derived from revenue-free jagirs bestowed on most of the historic shrines by Maharaja Ranjit Singh and other Sikh chiefs.

19.3.1 Misuse of Shrine Funds

The rise of the powerful Sikh chiefs in the later part of the eighteenth century and establishment of kingdom by Ranjit Singh in 1799 A.D. brought about a significant change in Sikh religion. The property and privileges attached to the religious places led to the introduction of complicated rites and rituals and emergence of rich and powerful *Mahants*. Almost all the well-known Gurdwaras were endowed with rich tax-free jagirs by Maharaja Ranjit Singh and other Sikh Chiefs. With sudden increase in the income, came a change in the style of living of the *Mahants* of some important Gurdwaras. They began to convert the trust property of the Gurdwara into their personal possessions. This was in total disregard of the injunctions laid down by Sikh Gurus and the Sikh scriptures. Gradually, the *Mahants* and their followers began to live a life of luxury and started indulging in various social evils. Followers of Sikhism tried to check the evil practices of these *Mahants* by social protest and organised a movement of liberation of Sikh shrines from the control of the hereditary *Mahants*.

This movement is popularly known as the Akali movement because of the *Akali Jathas* (bands of volunteers) leading this movement of reform.

19.3.2 Struggle for the Akali Control over the Golden Temple and Akal Takht



The city of Amritsar, earlier called Ramdaspur and Guru-ka-Chak, was founded by the fourth Guru, Ram Dass, in 1577. The Fifth Guru, Arjun Dev, built the Temple in 1589 now popularly known as the Golden Temple. The sixth Guru, Hargobind, built the Akal Takht and declared it as the Sikh seat of temporal authority. In its earlier stages, the Golden Temple and the Akal Takht were looked after by competent and pious priests like Bhai Mani Singh. But during the period of the persecution of the Sikhs at the hands of the Mughal Governors of Punjab and later by the Abdali invader, Ahmad Shah Abdali, the control of these two important Sikh centres passed on to the Udasi Mahants. During the days of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule the shrine was richly decorated with marble and gold plates and came to be known as the Golden Temple. A rich revenue-free *jagir* was also attached to these shrines. After the annexation of Punjab to the British India in 1849, the British Govt. took over the control of these two places and appointed a committee of ten members headed by a *Sarbarah* to look after their day-to-day affairs (John Mayhard, 'The Sikh Problem in the Punjab' in the Contemporary Review, September 1923, p. 295).

Mismanagement and corruption

The appointment of Sarbarah by the Government created more problems. The Sarbarah did not feel responsible towards the people but was busy pleasing his appointing authority—the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar. The priests indulged in all sorts of evil practices, such as misappropriation of offerings and other valuables. The sanctity of these places was destroyed. Here brothels were run, pornographic literature sold, and innocent women visiting the temples raped. (Jiwan Bhai Mohan Singh Vaid, p. 121).

Corrupt practices in the precincts of the Golden Temple and the Akal Takht at Amritsar and official control over its management had been a source of great discontent among the Sikhs long before the beginning of the movement for reform. The reformers were anxious to free these central seats as early as possible from evil influences and official control. The British authorities in Punjab resisted any effort at reform or change in the existing system of management. They thought that this would deprive them of the privilege to use these religious places to consolidate their power and weaken their political opponents. Generally the Government-appointed Sarbarahs of the Golden Temple were used for the glorification of the British rule and its functionaries. With the weakening of the Sikh control over the management and the increasing hold of officialdom, the manager and priests started taking their cue from the Deputy Commissioner and ignored Sikh opinion and sentiments in the day-to-day affairs of the temple. The Government appointed Sarbarah, after ensuring that the appointing authority was pleased, spent his time in appropriating the wealth belonging to the shrine and neglected his daily religious duties. Costly gifts to the temple slowly found their way to the homes of the Sarbarah and other priests. The precincts began to be used by *Pandits* and astrologers and idols were openly worshipped in the Gurdwara premises. According to contemporary accounts, on *Basant* and *Holi* festivals the whole place degenerated into a hunting ground for the local rogues, thieves and other bad characters. Pornographic literature was freely sold, and brothels were opened in the neighbouring houses where innocent women visiting the holy temples were made victims of the lust of licentious *Sadhus*, *Mahants* and their friends.

Discrimination on the basis of Caste

While Sikh religion does not recognise any caste distinctions, the priests in charge of the Golden Temple did not allow members of the so-called low-castes, known as Mazhabi Sikhs to offer their prayers in the temple directly. They had to hire an attendant of the so-called higher-caste to carry their offering of *Prasad* in the Temple. As a result of socio-religious awakening created by various movements of reform among the Sikh community the Khalsa Biradri of Amritsar advocated free integration of the members of the so-called low-castes, including community dining and inter-marriages. As the priests of the Golden Temple did not allow the members of the so-called low-castes, to enter the temple and offer *Prasad* themselves, the Khalsa Biradri thought of creating public awareness on the subject and defy the authority of the priests. They organised a *Diwan* in the Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, on the 12th of October, 1920, in which Professor Teja Singh, Bawa Harkishan Singh and Jathedar Kartar Singh Jhabbar and other prominent leaders of the reform movement participated. In the *Diwan* the so-called untouchables who had embraced Sikhism were baptised. Later prominent Sikh leaders shared food with them and marched to the Golden Temple in the form of a religious procession. When they reached the temple the priest on duty Bhai Gurbachan Singh refused to accept *Prasad* from the so-called low-castes and to offer prayer on their behalf. After heated exchange of

arguments the matter was decided by consulting the holy book, the decision went in favour of the party of reform. However, the priests did not accept the change in the status and left the shrine in protest. Since the holy book (Guru Granth) was left unattended the reformers took control of the situation and formed a committee for the management of the Golden Temple and the Akal Takht.

Thus you can see that reformers felt very strongly about:

- the misappropriation of funds by the temple management.
- the misuse of temple premises by anti social corrupt elements, and
- the ban on the entry of low caste people in the holy shrines.

Under these circumstances the Akali reformers had to take control of the important shrines — the Golden Temple and the Akal Takht.

Check Your Progress 2

1 List the main evils prevailing in the sikh shrines under Sarbarahs.

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2 Describe how the low caste people were discriminated against in religious matters?

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3 Why were the Sarbarahs not paying attention to the opinion of the Sikh Community in managing the shrines?

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19.3.3 Nankana Tragedy

After taking control of the Golden Temple and the Akal Takht at Amritsar the reformers paid their attention to other Sikh Gurdwaras. In Nankana, the birth-place of Guru Nanak Dev, Gurdwara Janam Asthan and other shrines were being controlled by hereditary Mahants. Narain Dass who was incharge of the Gurdwara Janam Asthan at Nankana was practising a number of social and religious evils. He kept a mistress, invited dancing girls into the Gurdwara and permitted profane singing in the holy premises. In spite of protest from different Sikh circles the Mahant did not abandon the evil practices. Accordingly, a Jatha of 130 reformers including some women proceeded to Gurdwara Janam Asthan under the leadership of Bhai Lachhman Singh. When the Jatha reached the Gurdwara in the early hours of February 20, 1921 the Mahant and the mercenaries hired by him attacked these armless, peaceful reformers. A number of marchers were killed and the wounded were tied to the trees and burnt. In order to destroy the evidence the Mahant and his men collected all the bodies and put them to fire.

The barbaric killing of all the 130 members of the Jatha by the Mahant sent waves of shock and resentment throughout the country. Mahatma Gandhi and other national leaders condemned this brutal action of the Mahant. Mahatma Gandhi visited Nankana on 3rd March to express sympathy with the Akali reformers. In his speech Mahatma Gandhi

condemned the action of the Mahant and advised the Akali reformers to offer non-cooperation to the Government in the matter of official commission of enquiry. It was on the advice of Mahatma Gandhi and other national leaders that the Akali reformers decided to broaden their movement. They launched a two pronged attack. It was directed against the corrupt Mahant on the one hand and the Punjab government on the other. It was this changed policy which led to the Akali agitations over the issues of the Keys of the *Toshakhana* (treasury) and later their peaceful struggle at *Guru-ka-Bagh*.

19.3.4 Toshakhana Key's Affair

As mentioned earlier the Akali reformers had taken control of the Golden Temple and the Akal Takht at Amritsar, when the priests ran away from the scene, and appointed a Committee for the management of these two shrines. The Committee asked the government-appointed manager of the Golden Temple to handover the keys of the Toshakhana (treasury) to the committee. But before the manager came to do so the keys were taken away by the British Deputy Commissioner.

This action of the government created great resentment in the Sikh community. To get back the keys the Akali reformers launched a powerful agitation which is popularly known as the **Keys Affair**.

In this agitation the Sikh reformers were also joined by the Congress volunteers in Punjab. Since Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation movement was already going on, the Punjab Government thought of isolating the Akali reformers from the congress programme of non-cooperation by releasing all the Akali volunteers arrested in connection with the agitation over the keys affair and returning the keys of the Golden temple treasury to the President of the committee. This victory of the Akali reformers was seen by the national leaders as a victory of the forces of nationalism. On this occasion Mahatma Gandhi sent the following telegram to Baba Kharak Singh, President of the S.G.P.C.:

"FIRST BATTLE FOR INDIA'S FREEDOM WON. CONGRATULATIONS"

After the suspension of the non-cooperation movement in February, 1922 as a result of violence at Chauri Chaura and arrest of Mahatma Gandhi and other Congress leaders, Punjab government thought of teaching a 'lesson' to the Akali reformers. This led to another agitation known as *Guru-ka-Bagh Morcha*.

Check Your Progress 3

1 What led to the tragedy at Nankana?

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2 How did the Akali Movement come into contact with the National Movement?

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3 What was the key's affair? Why did the British Government surrender on this issue?

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19.3.5 Guru-ka-Bagh Morcha

As mentioned above, unconditional release of the Akali prisoners arrested in connection with the keys affair and return of the keys to the committee undermined the prestige of the Punjab government. The officials in Punjab thought of retrieving their lost prestige by arresting the Akali volunteers who were cutting wood from the dry kikar (*Acacia Nilotica*) trees attached to the Gurdwara Guru-ka-Bagh. The argument used by the police was that the dry wood was private property of the Mahant of the Gurdwara and Akali reformers were committing a 'theft' by taking this wood for use in the community kitchen. To assert their right to cut dry trees for use in the community kitchen, the Jathas of the Akalis started marching to Guru-ka-Bagh and the police started arresting these reformers.



13. A Jatha of Akali volunteers marching to Guru-ka-Bagh on 25 October, 1922.

After arresting over 5,000 reformers the government in Punjab found no place in the jails to keep them. They started beating them mercilessly till they became unconscious and released them. In this peaceful suffering at Guru-ka-Bagh the Akali reformers won wide sympathy and support from the press and also from the national leaders. Rev. C.F. Andrews, a British missionary sympathetic to Indian political aspirations, after visiting the scene of Akali beating at Guru-ka-Bagh was so moved by the sufferings of the innocent Akali volunteers that he described the police action as "inhuman, brutal, foul and cowardly which was incredible to an Englishman and a moral defeat of England".



14. Arrests at Guru-Ka-Bagh Morcha

As a result of the criticism of the official action by the national leaders which found wide coverage in the press, the Governor of Punjab ordered the police to stop beating the Akali Jathas at Guru-ka-Bagh. All those arrested in connection with the Guru-ka-Bagh agitation were released unconditionally and the volunteers were allowed to carry the wood from the garden for use in the community kitchen at Guru-ka-Bagh.

19.3.6 The Akali Agitation in Nabha

Victories of the Akali reformers in two agitations, the keys Affair and the Guru-ka-Bagh, greatly raised the power and prestige and morale of the Akali leadership. In their hour of victory they launched another agitation and demanded the restoration of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha to his throne from which he had been forcibly removed by the British Govt. This issue was not directly related with the Akali movement whose chief concern so far had been social and religious reforms. But since by now the Akali reformers had emerged as a powerful expression of the nationalist protest in the province, the Congress leadership supported them in their agitation in Nabha. At a special session of the Congress Working Committee held at New Delhi in September 1923 the Congress decided to send Jawaharlal Nehru, A.T. Gidwani and K. Santhanam as observers to visit Nabha and report on the situation there to the Congress Working Committee. Nehru and his colleagues were arrested soon after entering the Nabha territory and put behind the bars on flimsy charges. During their stay in the Nabha jail and subsequent trial the Congress observers not only got first hand knowledge about the Akali struggle but also discovered the arbitrary nature of the justice in the Sikh state of Nabha which had been put under the control of a British administrator.

Jawaharlal Nehru in his statement that he wrote in the Nabha jail on the 23rd November, 1923 (*Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, edited by Prof. S. Gopal, pp. 369-75, Vol. I) attacked the judicial machinery in Nabha for their 'unscrupulous and crooked' ways and praised the Akali Sikhs for their courage and sacrifice. The last paragraph of the original hand written statement reads as follows:

"I rejoice that I am being tried for a cause which the Sikhs have made their own. I was in jail when the Guru-ka-Bagh struggle was gallantly fought and won by the Sikhs. I marvelled at the courage and sacrifice of the Akalis and wished that I could be given an opportunity of showing my deep admiration of them by some form of service. That opportunity has now been given to me and I earnestly hope that I shall prove worthy of their high tradition and fine courage. *Sat Sri Akal.*"

Central Jail
Nabha

Jawaharlal Nehru
Sept. 25, 1923

19.4 PASSAGE OF THE GURDWARA BILL AND END OF THE AKALI MOVEMENT

During their agitation in Nabha the Akalis faced toughest opposition from the British administrator of Nabha and Maharaja Bhupinder Singh, the Sikh ruler of the princely state of Patiala. As a result of firing over the Shahidi Jatha at Jaito in February, 1924 the agitation again took a serious turn. The Akali agitation was likely to affect the Sikh soldiers in the British army. Moreover through the Akali agitation Congress programme and ideology were spreading to the Sikh peasantry in Punjab. The presence of these factors compelled Punjab Government to find a solution to Akali problem by passing a Bill in July 1925 which gave the Sikh community a legal right to elect functionaries to manage their Gurdwaras. This legislation put an end to the hereditary control of the Mahants and introduced democratic control in the gurdwara management. And with this ended the five year long Akali agitation in Punjab in which over 30,000 Akali volunteers were put behind the bars and a large number of their sympathisers lost their jobs or pensions and were made to pay heavy fines.

As a result of their struggle the Akali reformers succeeded in liberating their historic Sikh shrines from the control of the hereditary Mahants. This put an end to social evils like:

- restrictions on the so-called low-caste Sikhs to make offerings in the Golden Temple,
- Mahants using the Gurdwara income for personal pleasures, and

ੴ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੂ ਸਾਰਿ ॥

Press Communiqué no. 558.

Instead of redressing the legitimate grievance of the Sikh Community concerning the Nabha State affair, Government has embarked upon the cruel policy of gagging the mouths of the Sikhs. Since Monday, the 16th July, the delivery of the post of the "Akali - Te - Pardesi" has been stopped. For two days, 16th and 17th, the private letters of the persons connected with the paper were also stopped. Today, the 18th, the private letters were delivered, but the mail of the newspaper continues to be detained. On enquiry from the Post office, it was found that the above action had been taken according to an order of the Government of India, an official copy of which has not yet been supplied to the paper. Presumably this drastic measure has been taken against the paper because it raised the alarm in the matter of the virtual deposition of Maharaja Sahib of Nabha.

Last year the Government stopped the mail of the Shromani Committee, during the Gurm - Ka - Bagh days, with what success the public knows. It is hoped that the sympathy of the Sikhs will once more defeat the purpose of this repressive measure by all possible means and keep the "Akali - Te - Pardesi" in complete touch with the happenings in the Panth.

Amritsar,
18th July 1923.

Mansingh
for General Secretary
Shromani Gurdwara Committee

- dancing girls being invited in the Gurdwara premises and other such evils.

The movement also created a great religious and political awakening among the people. They were made to realise that there was no religious sanction in the Sikh tradition for practising caste. According to the Gurdwara Act, any Sikh irrespective of his caste can be elected to any position including that of the President of the SGPC Sikh women also got the right of vote at par with men. They could perform all religious and social duties in the Sikh temples.

The Akali movement also created social awareness among the inhabitants of the princely Sikh states of Patiala, Nabha, Jind and Faridkot, who were groaning under social and religious oppressions. It was the result of the march of the Akali Jathas in the villages of the former Sikh princely states that gave the people the much needed moral support to organise themselves to fight against the social oppression in these princely states. It is interesting to note that even when the Akali movement was over, the people in the princely Sikh states continued their fight under the leadership of Sardar Sewa Singh Thikriwala. The Praja Mandal and state people's conference continued their struggle till India became independent and these states were merged with the Union of India.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1 What was the attitude of Indian National Congress towards the Akali Struggle in Nabha?

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- 2 How did the passing of the Gurdwara Act in 1925 democratise the administration of the Sikh shrines?

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- 3 List three main achievements of the Akali Movement.

i)

ii)

iii)

19.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you studied how Sikhism which started as a result of social protest against ritualism and casteism, soon became victim of social evils like caste system, religious ritualism, dowry system, etc. Their religious places were badly managed and ridden with corruption. A number of reform movements tried to remove these evils. However, the Akali Movement was the most powerful and wide spread in this respect. The British Govt. was most unsympathetic to the Akali demands and tried to suppress them. In the process, the Akali movement established links with the national movement. It got full support from the Nationalist leaders. After a prolonged struggle, the Akalis managed to free their shrines from corrupt management. Gurdwaras were made free from corruption and people of all castes got free access to them. The Govt. was compelled to pass Gurdwara Act in 1925 which democratised the management of the Sikh shrines.

19.6 KEY WORDS

Anand Marriage: A simple form of marriage which was performed without dowry, usual marriage rituals and procession etc.

Godhead: Divine nature of God

Mahants: Keepers of Gurdwaras, they established their institutions and admitted followers.

Mazhabi Sikhs: Sikhs belonging to low caste who were not allowed entry into Sikh shrines.

Precincts: An enclosed area around a large building (in this case Gurdwaras) which is surrounded by a boundary or wall.

Profane: Having or showing disrespect for God or for holy things.

Revenue Free Jagir: Land given to individuals or institutions on which no revenue was charged by the state.

Sarbarah: The caretakers of Gurdwaras appointed by the government.

SGPC: Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. This committee was founded by the Akalis after taking over Golden Temple and Akal Takht to manage their affairs. Later on it started managing all the Gurdwaras in Punjab.

Temporal Authority: Authority related to worldly affairs (practical and material) as opposed to religious affairs.

Udasis: A Sikh sect which did not adopt the outward symbols of Sikhism like keeping long hair, beard, wearing Kara or keeping Kirpan.

19.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1 The main evils in society against which reformers fought were caste restriction, worship of tombs and graves, worship of many Gods; illiteracy, dowry system, barter of daughters in marriages and female infanticide.
- 2 Anand Karai marriage was a simple form of marriage. See Sub-section 19.2.1, Baba Dayal Das, his son Darbara Singh and Baba Ram Singh.
- 3 Kuka movement drew the attention of masses against the social evils. Sub-section 19.2.2 again.
- 4 The Singh Sabha movement worked against illiteracy and founded a chain of Khalsa Colleges to impart education and nationalist feelings. See-Sub-section 19.2.3 for details.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1 The main evils prevalent in Sikh shrines were misappropriation of funds by sarbarahs, misuse of shrines by anti-social elements and ban on the entry of low caste people. Also read Sub-section 19.3.1 and 19.3.2 before writing your answer.
- 2 The low caste people were not allowed to enter the shrines and pay offerings. Also read Sub-section 19.3.2.
- 3 *Sarbarahs* were appointed by the British Government. Therefore they only tried to please their masters and ignored the opinion of the Sikh community. Also read Sub-section 19.3.2.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1 The Akali reformers' peaceful march to take control of the Gurdwara Janam Sthān at Nankana from the corrupt mahant led to the tragedy. Why these reformers wanted to take this Gurdwara? Read Sub-sec. 19.3.3 again.
- 2 After the Nankana Tragedy, Mahatma Gandhi and a number of national leaders visited Punjab and extended full support to the Akali cause. The Akalis also gave call of non-cooperation. Also read Sub-sec. 19.3.3 and 19.3.4.
- 3 After obtaining the control of Golden Temple the Akalis demanded that the keys to its treasury be handed over to them. The British surrendered the demand because they were facing the Non-cooperation movement of Congress and wanted to isolate Akalis from it. Also read Sub-sec. 19.3.4.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1 Indian National Congress supported the Akali demand in Nabha and sent special observers. Read Sub-sec. 19.3.6.
- 2 With the passing of the Gurdwara Act of 1925, every Sikh irrespective of caste and creed could get elected to the SGPC to administer the shrines. Women also got right to vote. Also See section 19.4.
- 3 Your answer should include the achievements like doing away of caste restrictions, end of misuse of people's money, cleaning of Gurdwaras from anti-social elements, and end to hereditary Mahant system, which created social and political consciousness.