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## The Gangsar Jaito Morcha: A Unique Struggle in Sikh History

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### ABSTRACT

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, several social, religious and political movements emerged in India against the oppressive policies imposed by the British government. Among these, the Akali movement had a unique and important place in Punjab. The main objective of this movement was to free the Sikh Gurdwaras from the encroachment of non-Sikh and corrupt elements. Under this movement, several fronts were started which were focused on bringing the management of Sikh Gurdwaras into the hands of the Sikh community. Among these Morchas, the Gangsar Jaito Morcha played a special role in Sikh history and became a center of attraction all over the world. This Morchas was not only religious but also had political significance as an integral part of the Gurdwara Reform Movement. Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha State was known for his strong sympathy towards the Akali movement and the Gurdwara Reform Movement going on in Punjab. He organized a Martyrdom Day to honor the Sikhs killed in the Nankana Sahib massacre and also wore a black turban (Dastar) as a sign of protest. For doing so, the British government forcibly deposed him in 1923 and sent him to Dehradun. This incident was widely condemned and forced the Sikh community to intensify its struggle by starting the Jaito Morcha. This Morcha not only provided enthusiasm



and direction to the Akali movement but also further strengthened unity and awareness within the Sikh community. Through this Morcha, the Sikh community sent a clear and powerful message to the British authorities that they would never back down from their religious rights. The success of the Morcha helped in the enactment of the Gurdwara Act in 1925, through which the management of Sikh gurdwaras came under the control of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). This paper is based on primary and secondary sources, which I have collected from several libraries of different universities such as Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha Library of Punjabi University Patiala, Bhai Gurdas Library of Guru Nanak Dev University, Sri Amritsar Sahib, Joshi Library of Panjab University, Chandigarh, various newspapers and magazines.

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## **Introduction**

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many movements emerged against the oppressive policies of the British and to revitalize Indian society, such as the Singh Sabha, Ghadar, Akali, and Naujawan Bharat Sabha. Among these movements, the Akali movement holds a unique place. It began with the Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Morcha during the first decade of the 20th century. Gurdwara Rakabganj Sahib was a great place associated with Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji in Delhi. When the British replaced Calcutta with Delhi as their capital in 1911, they built a road from the land of Gurdwara Rakab Ganj to the Viceroy's residence in early 1914. To complete this road, they also demolished a part of the wall of Gurdwara Rakab Ganj. To complete this road, they also demolished a part of the wall of Gurdwara Rakab Ganj. Due to this, the resentment against the British government increased among the Sikhs, but during this time, the First World War broke out. Due to which the Sikhs postponed this work. After the end of the First World War, when the Sikhs requested the government to build this wall, they decided to delay and send a martyr's party of 100 Akalis to build the wall on December 1, 1920. The government's eyes were soon opened and they built the wall. Thus, with this first victory, slogans of victory echoed and the stage was set for the next Morchas (fronts). After that, on January 25, 1921, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee sent a martyred group of 40 Akalis under the leadership of Bhai Teja Singh Bhuchar to liberate Tarn Taran Sahib from the evil and mischievous mahants. The Mahant ordered Dr. Sukhwinder Kaur and Dr. Harjinder Kaur



his goons to attack the peaceful Akalis, in which two Singhs, Bhai Hazara Singh and Bhai Hukam Singh, were martyred and 17 others were injured. This brutal spirit of the Singhs forced the Mahant to flee and Gurdwara Tarn-Taran Sahib came under their control. After this, on February 20, 1920, a group under Bhai Lachhman Singh advanced towards Nankana Sahib Gurdwara Sahib to free Gurdwara Nankana Sahib from the evil Mahant Narayan Das. Mahant Narayan Das ordered his goons to attack the peaceful group and martyred 130 Singhs with great cruelty. This was an incomparable sacrifice, but this sacrificial act put the management of Nankana Sahib in the hands of the Sikh community and the Gurdwara Sahib was freed from Mahant Narayan Das. According to Dr. Sukhmani Bal, "The Nankana tragedy shook Sikh hearts and had immediate and long-lasting effects on the Gurdwara reform movement.<sup>1</sup> Now the British government tried to suppress the Akali movement by force. On November 7, 1921, the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar took possession of the keys of the Toshkhana of Sachkhand Sri Harmandir Sahib Ji so that the administrative work of the Golden Temple would be stopped. On November 21, 1921, the Akalis staged a protest to take back the keys. 200 Akalis were arrested by the government. Finally, the government had to bow down to the Akalis and on January 17, 1922, the keys were returned to the President of the Shiromani Committee, Sardar Kharak Singh. This was a great victory. This victory was celebrated for several days and such scenes of joy were seen in the entire province that can neither be compared nor compared.<sup>2</sup> During this time, the Akalis staged a protest at the 'Guru Ka Bagh' Gurdwara Sahib located in the Ajnala Tehsil of Amritsar. This Gurdwara was under the control of Mahant Sundar Das, who was a wicked and mischievous person. On August 29, 1921, the Shiromani Committee sent a group and took over the management of this Gurdwara, but the Mahant did not give up his right to the land of the Gurdwara Sahib. The movement began in August 1922. Groups started leaving from Akal Takht Sahib. The government committed inhumane atrocities on them and arrested more than 200 Akalis. On August 31, 1922, a group came from Tarn Taran. The government got the police to attack the group. Due to which two Akalis were martyred. After this, peaceful groups of 100 Akalis started coming to the 'Guru Ka Bagh' Gurdwara continuously. The police committed a lot of atrocities on them and in November 1922, More than 5000 Akalis were imprisoned till 1922. The Akali groups gave proof of bravery and honesty. Finally, the British government was forced to accept the rights of the Sikhs on 'Guru Ke Bagh' on 17th November, 1922. When the 'Guru Ka Bagh Morcha' was going on, during that time the government decided to arrest many Akalis and send them to Attock Jail. The train carrying many of the arrested Sikhs was to pass through Hassan Abdal. The Sangat of Panja Sahib decided to serve langar to these Sikhs on 30th October, 1922, the day the train was to reach Panja Sahib station, but the government ordered the train not to stop at Panja



Sahib station. Many Sikhs sat on the line to stop the train. Even when the Sikhs sat on the line, the train did not stop. Rather, the train was run over. Due to which two Sikhs, Bhai Pratap Singh and Bhai Karam Singh, were martyred and many Sikhs were injured and mutilated. After this, the train was stopped and the Sikhs fulfilled their vow by serving langar. This was a great event which will always shine as an example of the unparalleled sacrifice of the Sikhs.<sup>3</sup> Thus we see that the main reason for starting all the above-given Morchas was religious. In which the Gurdwaras were to be freed from the clutches of the miscreants, but the Jaito Morcha was different from all these Morchas. Jaito was a small town in Nabha state and the historical Gurdwara of Gangsar was adorned here. Where Guru Gobind Singh Ji had laid his holy feet. But during the year 1923, it became a center of attraction throughout the world during the Akali Morcha. The King of Nabha, Maharaja Ripudaman Singh, was very sympathetic to the Akalis. He had celebrated Shaheed Diwas as a mark of respect for the Sikhs martyred during the Nankana Sahib massacre and also wore a black turban as a sign of protest. Apart from this, he had secretly supported the Akalis during the 'Guru Ka Bagh' front. Due to these reasons, the British government had turned against the Maharaja. The Maharaja, who had ascended the throne on December 20, 1911, was deposed from the throne on July 5-9, 1923 in favor of his minor son, Pratap Singh. According to the British government, the Maharaja had abdicated on his own accord, but the Akalis knew that the British had forced the Maharaja to abdicate.<sup>4</sup> Akali leader Master Tara Singh compared this to the removal of Maharaja Duleep Singh from the throne of the Lahore Darbar. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee took up the question of the restoration of Maharaja Nabha and passed a resolution unanimously. At a time when the Sikh community has become enlightened, deposing the Sikh king is a challenge to the Sikh community and a break in the organization. For this reason, it was decided to celebrate Nabha Day on September 9, 1923.<sup>5</sup>

After this, for the restoration of the Maharaja, the Shiromani Committee decided to send Jaito Jathas every day from Akal Takht Amritsar and also set up a morcha. Initially, Jathas consisting of 25 members started going to Jaito every day after taking a pledge to remain peaceful in action, speech and contemplation in front of the Akal Takht. When these Jathas reached Gurdwara Gangsar Jaitu, the police unleashed unimaginable atrocities on the peaceful Akalis. The people of Nabha were also not happy with the government. Due to this, the Sangat of the surrounding area decided to hold Diwan and Path in Gurdwara Gangsar on 25, 26 and 27 August 1923. At this time, the police entered the Gurdwara and arrested the Singh sitting under the Guru Granth Sahib.<sup>6</sup> The Sangat expressed great protest over this and decided that they would continue the Path and Diwan until the government admitted its mistake. The



Shiromani Committee sent a group of 25 Singhs to Jaito on 1 September 1923 to perform Path. This group and the Sikh Sangat of the area started performing Path. The British government intervened in this and on 14 September 1923, the police of the Nabha state attacked Gurdwara Gangsar and all the Singhs who were listening to the Path of Guru Granth Sahib Ji or sitting under the Guru Granth Sahib Ji were caught and arrested. This incident was opposed in all over Punjab and resolutions were passed against the government. After September 14, a morcha was organized at Jaito. From September 15, the Shiromani Committee started sending groups of 25 Singhs each from Sri Akal Takht Sahib.<sup>7</sup> They were arrested and then released. Some national leaders of India were also very impressed by the sincerity and determination of these groups. According to the prominent leader of the Congress, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, “they showed amazing courage and endurance and did not take a single step back or raise their hands against the police”.<sup>8</sup> In order to put an end to these morchas, the British government of Punjab declared the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and the Shiromani Akali Dal illegal on October 13, 1923 AD and all the members were arrested and imprisoned. On the other hand, to further strengthen the movement, the Shiromani Committee decided to send a large martyrdom group of 500 Akalis to Jaito on the 300th anniversary of the Nankana Sahib massacre. On February 9, 1924, the Shiromani Prabandhak Committee decided to send the group. During this group, the Sikhs again showed great bravery and joined in large numbers. According to the report of the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar, those who joined the group were not regular visitors to the Darbar Sahib, but real devotees.<sup>9</sup>,,, Later, Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlu, Pandit Dina Nath and some other members of the Congress Party also joined the group. According to official reports, about 30 thousand people saw the group walking from the clock tower of Amritsar.<sup>10</sup> This group also prayed before the Akal Takht Sahib that they would remain calm in all circumstances. The people of Punjab gave a warm welcome to the villages through which this group passed. Passing through various villages and receiving a warm welcome from the Sikh peasantry of Malwa, this group reached Bargari (Faridkot state) on February 20, 1924 and pitched its tents.<sup>11</sup>

On the morning of February 21, after the singing of ‘Asa Di Vaar’, the group moved forward. The group was moving forward in a very peaceful spirit. There were crowds of people on the right and left. In front was the Panj Nishan Sahib and in the middle was the form of Guru Granth Sahib Ji. At that time, the administration of Nabha state was in the hands of Mr. Wilson Johnstone, an Englishman. On February 21, 1924, when this group reached Gurdwara Tibbi Sahib (Jaito), Mr. Johnstone Wilson fired on the group. Singing the Guru's words, the group moved towards Gurdwara



Sahib with their arms raised in the rain of bullets. Guru De Lal was saying, "Khalsa Ji, it is one day to die. The festival of martyrdom is approaching. Today, death is the bride's wedding, do not look back and move forward. Do not let the sacrifices of Guru Sahib and the ancient Singhs go in vain... Prove this: the Sikh community is awake, not dead."<sup>12</sup> During this firing, about 100 Singhs were martyred and 200 Singhs were injured.<sup>13</sup> After this massacre, the British officer Johnstone Wilson thought that the Sikhs would be scared and the Morcha would end, but the opposite happened. This incident created an uproar in the entire Indian politics. The government's action was condemned at every place. Many Indian leaders expressed sympathy with the Sikhs. The news of this incident spread all over the world. Public meetings were held in Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Karachi, in which prominent national leaders like Muhammad Ali, Shaukat Ali, C.R. Das, Pandit Motilal Nehru and Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya etc. delivered speeches. The Congress Party called a special meeting in Delhi. In which Dr. Kitchlew presented a report on Jaito's Morcha. As a result, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Principal Gidwani and K. Santhanam were sent to Jaito. As soon as he entered Nabha, he was also arrested and kept in custody. In this way, the Akali fighters became inspiring all over the country. The Jaito march became the second Nankana march for the Sikhs. Now, more groups of 500 each started leaving for Jaito from Sri Akal Takht Sahib. The Sikhs sacrificed their lives to attain martyrdom. This march continued for a long time. On February 28, 1924, another group left for Jaito from Amritsar Sahib. On March 14, 1924, this group reached Jaito. Barbed wires were installed all around the Gurdwara. There was a police guard everywhere. Forts and machine guns were installed near the Gurdwara. The army and police were standing with guns pointed straight at them on every side. British officer Wilson Johnstone was present at that place along with other officers. When this group was 100-150 yards away from Gurdwara Gangsar, Congress leader Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya was also present at that time. He told Mr. Wilson Johnstone, "Look, the group has no weapons, you cannot shoot at peaceful and unarmed Singhs. Hearing this, Johnstone became silent." But when the group started moving forward, he ordered arrest and arrested all the Singhs of the group and kept them in the Jaito fort for two or three days and later sent them to Nabha jail. The arrested protesters were treated very badly by the jail authorities. This Jaito Morcha continued for about a year. By April 17, 1925, 17 groups of 500-500 Akalis reached Jaito. The government kept torturing them and imprisoning them in jails. Finally, the government handed over the Jaito Gurdwara to the Akalis. In July 1925, the Gurdwara Act was passed. With it, this movement also ended. Now the government released all the Akalis arrested on the Jaito front. In July 1925, permission was given to perform Akhand Path at Jaito. A series of 101 Akhand Paths was started. The Bhog of which was held on August 6, 1925. After the Bhog, all the groups left Jaito and gathered at Sri Tarn-



Taran Sahib on August 6, 1925. From here, these groups reached Sachkhand Sri Harmandir Sahib Amritsar in the form of a Nagar Kirtan. Here these groups were honored. Now if we talk about it, the Jaito front was different from other fronts. During this time, the Sikh people had awakened against British rule. During 1847-1849 AD, before the British occupied Punjab, brave warriors like Bhai Maharaj Singh had strongly opposed the British and had launched an open rebellion to save the Sikh kingdom of Maharaja Duleep Singh. The Jaito Morcha also had the same form. Bhai Maharaj Singh had also first gone from place to place and awakened the Sikhs of Majha-Doaba and had taken a vow to die. Then he took up the sword and fought the British on the battlefield, but now in the Jaito Morcha, the Sikhs did not take up the sword and brought awakening among their people and peacefully organized morchas in favor of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh with the spirit of sacrifices. Because now the times had changed, only the spirit of sacrifices instead of the sword could force the British to bow down. That is why they adopted this peaceful and sacrificial method. In all the previous morchas. In many of those morchas, the British government had taken action against the Sikhs in their favor at the behest of the Mahants, but in the Jaito Morcha, the government had taken direct action against the Sikhs. Even machine guns were mounted on the fort near the Gurdwara. Police guards with guns were posted around the Gurdwara. As we know, the Sikhs who had gone to Canada and America were also against British rule. They had started the Ghadar movement against the British. They had also participated in the Jaito Morcha. The Jaito Morcha had a great impact in Canada. The Ghadars there had also decided to send a martyr's group to the Jaito Morcha. In 1924 AD. In 1991, a martyrdom group of 11 Sikhs from Canada set out from Vancouver, passing through Singapore, Hong Kong, and Singapore on the way, taking the Sikhs from there with them, and reaching India with 42 Sikhs. The main objective of all these was to challenge the British Raj so that it would stop its interference in the affairs of the Sikh princely states, but in all this they were getting power only from the Khalsa Panth. Because religion had a lot of importance in Sikh politics. Which was initiated by Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji. That is why even now they had taken the place of the front to Gurdwara Gangsar so that by taking guidance from the Guru's words, this front should be successful with martyrdom and sacrifices. In the end, we can say that Jaito's front had a different form from other Akali fronts. Its objective was both religious and political and it was a challenge to British rule.



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