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Between Protest and Pragmatism: The Dual Strategy of Shiromani Akali Dal During the Gurdwara Reform Movement 1920-1925

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Abstract

This article examines the role of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) in the Gurdwara Reform Movement (1920-1925), analysing how it mobilized the Sikh community in Punjab to reclaim gurdwaras from *mahants*. The SAD implemented a calculated strategy through a structured network of Akali *Jathas* (volunteer bands) and grassroots activism, maintained with institutional discipline. This study argues that the SAD achieved its objectives via a dual approach: leveraging Sikh religious principles while strategically navigating the colonial legal framework to establish the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) as a centralized authority. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the SAD's unique religio-political model not only reinforced Sikh identity but also offered effective resistance against British colonial rule. Drawing on colonial records preserved in the Punjab Archives and institutional libraries; the research reveals that the SAD's disciplined nonviolent resistance established new paradigms for faith-based collective action in colonial India.

Keywords: Shiromani Akali Dal, Akali Jathas, Gurdwara Reform Movement, Shiromani Gurdwara, Parbandhak Committee.



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Introduction

It is a matter of fact that the Gurdwara Reform Movement (GRM) was a turning point in the religious and political history of Sikhs in colonial Punjab. The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) emerged as a leading force during this movement, serving as the task force of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). However, SAD was not the only organization involved; other groups also played significant roles in the Gurdwara Reform Movement. Over the course of five years, SAD evolved into the primary forum for formulating and executing the movement's policies, ultimately transforming into a religious-cum-political party for the Sikh community. The strategies and activities adopted by the Shiromani Akali Dal are crucial to understanding how it became the dominant political force of the Sikhs, later playing a key role in safeguarding Sikh interests during the struggle for independence from British rule.

Background of Shiromani Akali Dal

After the Guru period, the eighteenth century was a time of struggle for the Sikh community—not only for survival but also for expanding their identity and political influence. During their conquests of Delhi, Jamrud, Leh, Ladakh, and other regions, the Sikhs seized every opportunity to construct shrines and enhance their significance, reflecting the deep reverence and devotion Sikhs held for these sacred sites. Under Sikh rule, the Sikh rulers did not interfere in the internal management of the shrines. However, the British government likely recognized that these shrines were far more than mere places of worship or ritual for the Sikhs—they were central to their religious, social, and political life. The shrines served as gathering places (*sangat*), where Sikhs organized themselves and derived collective strength, shaping both their community identity and political power.

The British government took particular interest in Sikh shrines, especially the Golden Temple and Akal Takht, establishing a management committee and appointing a *sarbarah* (custodian) to oversee them. During this period, the Mahants began treating Gurdwara properties as their personal possessions. This era witnessed the peak of anti-Gurmat practices, with even untouchability being practiced in these sacred spaces of universal fellowship (Nijjar, 1974). The deteriorating state of Sikh religious institutions deeply troubled the Sikh community. This period of crisis gave rise to several reform movements and organizations, including the Singh Sabha Movement, the Chief Khalsa Diwan, the Gurdwara Reform Movement, and ultimately led to the formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) and the Shiromani Akali Dal. A pivotal moment occurred on October 12, 1920, at the Darbar Sahib and Akal Takht when Sikhs from communities traditionally regarded as untouchables took charge of the Akal Takht after priests abandoned it. They were refused to offer prasad, marking a significant challenge to the existing order. The Sikh community first established a seventeen-member committee, followed by a nine-member committee after negotiations with the administration. These committees represented the crucial first steps toward the eventual creation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, marking a watershed moment in Sikh institutional history (Markandan, 1989, p.179).

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) stands as one of the most significant achievements of the twentieth century Sikh community, outcome of numerous sacrifices. While not without administrative shortcomings, its role extends far beyond shrine maintenance. True to the Gurus' teachings, the SGPC provides comprehensive religious, social, and political guidance to the global Sikh community while actively addressing their contemporary concerns. Historically, when the Sikh Panth faced persecution under Mughal rule, followers were forced to abandon their homes and seek refuge in forests, mountains, and deserts. During this turbulent period, control of

Gurdwaras fell to Mahants. Initially, they served diligently, but over time, their service became tainted by greed and self-interest.

Along with the reverence for Guru Granth Sahib, idol worship began to emerge within some Sikh shrines. Idols were incorporated into various religious ceremonies, while the *mahants* misused temple funds for personal luxuries. When the Sikh community collectively opposed these practices, the *mahants* responded by employing hired goons to suppress dissent. This alarming situation deteriorated further with the introduction of alcohol and drug consumption within Gurdwara premises. The Singh Sabha Movement's emergence in the late nineteenth century brought into sharp focus the urgent need for reform. It became increasingly evident that neither Sikh doctrine nor proper religious conduct could be restored without fundamental improvements in Gurdwara management (Sulakhan Singh., 1999, p.75).

The Gurudwara Reform Movement was formally launched during the Sarbat Khalsa convened under Jathedar Kartar Singh Jhabbar's leadership at the Akal Takht on December 13, 1920. An early success came on November 18, 1920, when Sikh reformers peacefully liberated Gurdwara Hassan Abdal from mahant control - a bloodless victory that significantly boosted community morale. These developments marked the beginning of what would become known as the Gurdwara Reform Movement (Singh, 1988, p.25). During this historic gathering, several critical resolutions were adopted to formalize the reform movement. It was unanimously agreed that every Sikh sevak (devotee) would commit to dedicating at least one month each year in service to the Panth (Sikh collective). To ensure continuous momentum, the assembly resolved to maintain a permanent corps of no fewer than one hundred dedicated Sikh volunteers at all times, ready to participate in Gurdwara reform activities and related struggles. The resolution further empowered the leadership to mobilize additional volunteers as needed to uphold the Panth's decisions. Strategically, Amritsar was established as the movement's central headquarters, with accompanying provisions to set up supporting branch centers across other key regions to coordinate local reform efforts.

During a pivotal reunion at the Akal Takht on January 23, 1921, the organization was formally established as the Akali Dal, with Gurmukh Singh Jhabal appointed as its first Jathedar. However, the Akali Dal would rise to prominence under the later leadership of Master Tara Singh. The movement underwent a significant evolution on March 29, 1922, when it was renamed Shiromani Akali Dal following the addition of the honorific "Shiromani" to its title. This reconstituted body gained formal recognition as the legitimate representative of the Sikh Panth in legislative assemblies. These organizational developments followed earlier reforms initiated on October 12, 1920, when a committee formed by the Sikh Sangat assumed management of the Golden Temple complex. This transition occurred after the historic decision to permit Dalits unrestricted entry to the sacred shrine, marking a watershed moment in Sikh egalitarian practice (Dilagira & Kerr, 1995).

A committee of 175 members was constituted to manage the Sikh shrines. Thirty-six members of the committee were also nominated by the colonial government. The SGPC decided to launch a *morcha* (agitation) to liberate the gurdwaras from the control of the mahants. The SAD was a task force to accomplish this task through close coordination with the various jathas. The period from 1920 to 1925 was one of great struggle, bravery, and sacrifices by the Akali jathas. The Akalis launched many agitations, including the Nankana Sahib massacre (1921), the Morcha Chabian (1921), the Guru Ka Bagh Morcha (1922), and the Jaito Morcha (1923). Despite colonial repression during which the SGPC and the Akali Dal were banned, and despite the atrocities of the mahants (mostly at Nankana Sahib and Guru ka Bagh), the movement remained non-violent

and disciplined. As a result of the movement, more than 30,000 Akalis were arrested, 2,000 were injured, and 400 were killed ("All India Congress Committee (AICC)," n.d.).

Objectives of Shiromani Akali Dal

The primary objective behind establishing the Shiromani Akali Dal was to provide *sevadars* (servicemen) as needed by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and to transfer control of gurdwaras to the Shiromani Committee after liberating them from the Mahants. As the Akali Dal's struggle gained momentum, it created significant political upheaval in Punjab through successful agitations including the Morcha Nankana Sahib (1921), Morcha Chabian (1921), Guru Ka Bagh Morcha (1922), and Jaito Morcha (1923). These campaigns substantially enhanced the prestige and influence of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, leading to the establishment of central offices for both organizations at Darbar Sahib. The unification of these two entities marked the climax of the Gurdwara Reform Movement, generating considerable concern among British authorities about their growing power. In response, the British government declared both organizations illegal on October 12, 1923, maintaining the ban until its eventual lifting on September 13, 1926 - nearly three years later (Sharma, 1992, p.41). After the approval of the Gurdwara Act, the Shiromani Akali Dal won a landslide victory in the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) elections, winning 85 seats, though the British government also fielded its own faction, Sundar Singh Majithia and Mehtab Singh. The victory of SAD opens the way forward in politics for Sikhs.

The independence movement and the Gurdwara reform movement were simultaneously active in India at the beginning of the twentieth century, pursuing their respective goals. One objective of the SAD was to seek British government assistance for implementing the Sikh renaissance movement. This policy was based on the rationale that political opposition to the British would require alliance with the Hindu community, which could undermine Sikh efforts to establish a separate identity from Hinduism. It proved difficult to pursue both objectives simultaneously with equal emphasis, forcing a choice between the two priorities.

The SAD was naturally less anti-government and more anti-Brahmanism, as its primary aim was to reform gurdwaras by eliminating prevailing Brahmanical practices. The conflict with the Punjab government began when newly joined Congress-affiliated Sikh leaders passed a resolution on May 9, 1921, refusing to cooperate with the government regarding the Nankana Sahib martyrs' trial. In early March 1921, Mahatma Gandhi and Maulana Shaukat Ali visited Nankana Sahib, where they spoke for an hour praising the Khalsa Panth for its non-cooperation in the Saka trial. Later, Lala Lajpat Rai also visited the Sikhs. Both he and Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya disagreed with Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation program. Influenced by these speeches, Mota Singh proposed a non-cooperation resolution, which was endorsed by those present.

However, Harbans Singh Attari, Bhai Jodh Singh, and Kartar Singh Jhabbar - the movement's leading figures - opposed adopting the resolution in the meeting. The Akali Dal leaders considered it appropriate to seek all possible assistance from the British government for the complete reform of gurdwaras. To achieve this, they aimed to keep the movement separate from contemporary political issues by maintaining its purely religious character. According to Akali Dal leaders in the Gurdwara Reform Movement, government assistance was necessary either to improve Gurdwara management or to remove it from the mahants' control. The Akali Dal also maintained that if the mahants occupying the gurdwaras pursued legal action uncontested, the rulings would be against the Sikh community's interests (Singh, 1973, pp.48-53).

The Akali Dal leadership, largely disagreeing with government policies and objectives, urged all other leaders of the Gurdwara Reform Movement to adopt a serious and far-sighted approach to Sikh religious issues. They recognized that confrontation with the British government would not serve Sikh community interests, especially after the end of Sikh rule. Therefore, Sikhs needed to maintain their separate religious identity and secure political rights through cooperation with the British government. They also believed the freedom struggle should proceed alongside the Hindu community while preserving their distinct religious identity. For over a century, Hindus had pursued a policy of absorbing Sikhs, as historically occurred with other Indian-originated religions like Buddhism, Jainism, and the Bhagat sects, which were eventually absorbed into Hinduism. Such concerns naturally preoccupied Sikh leaders.

Regarding the freedom movement, these Sikh leaders maintained that the desire for independence would not diminish after the loss of the Sikh state. They explicitly stated that temporary withdrawal from the independence movement should not be interpreted as abandoning the freedom struggle. Their message to the British government was clear: The Gurdwara Reform Movement remained purely religious in nature. Bhai Jodh Singh, a prominent leader of the movement, emphasized in his speech at the 14th Sikh Educational Conference in Delhi his vision to build a national force for Sikh independence. He warned that distancing themselves from the freedom movement would prove disastrous for the Sikh community. Achieving this objective required fostering national consciousness among Sikhs through modern education (Rekhi, 1999, p.46).

The Akali Dal leadership, advocating prioritization of the Gurdwara Reform Movement over the independence movement, alerted the Sikh community to their concern for preserving Sikh national identity. Consequently, they urged Sikhs participating in the freedom movement to consider themselves first as Sikhs and then as Indians in every action. These perspectives on national independence served not only Sikh interests but also benefited the freedom movement itself, as Sikhs could best contribute to the nation by consolidating their own strength. Emphasizing both the distinct identity of the Sikh community and India's multinational character, these leaders maintained that weakening any foundational nation (including the Sikh nation) would inevitably weaken the entire country.

The Congress leadership sought to divert some Sikh leaders from the reform issue and redirect the movement toward national independence. They rejected the Sikhs' demand for separate political rights. Lala Lajpat Rai openly opposed Bawa Harkrishan Singh's advocacy for Sikh rights, maintaining that Sikhs were Hindus and therefore should not demand separate rights. Mahatma Gandhi shared this view. On October 20, 1920, at a Sikh League event in Lahore, Gandhi stated: "I have learned that some young Sikhs are occupying gurdwaras, but this is improper." Meanwhile, both the Gurdwara Reform Movement leaders and the Chief Khalsa Diwan believed that comprehensive gurdwara reform required abandoning non-cooperation, as management and non-cooperation were fundamentally incompatible. For instance, had non-cooperation been applied to the Nankana Sahib land case, the property would have been awarded to the Gurdwara Committee (A. Singh, 1986, p.79).

There was no doubt that the British colonial regime, exploiting both their political dominance and internal Sikh divisions, vigorously worked to suppress Sikh national power after the end of Sikh rule in 1849. This effort began with the deliberate aim of eliminating the Panth's representative body from politics, and the same motivation influenced their approach to the Akali movement. While the British government initially viewed it as purely religious, the Nankana Sahib massacre marked a turning point, after which some Sikhs - influenced by the freedom movement - began

joining the nationwide Non-Cooperation Movement led by Gandhi, transforming it into a political force (Kumar & Sieberer, 1991, p.106).

The Akali Dal, as the leading organ of the Gurdwara Reform Movement, developed a comprehensive strategy to leverage pressure from both the Non-Cooperation Movement and Khilafat Movement to achieve its objectives. These included: placing Amritsar Khalsa College and key gurdwaras under Sikh community control and reconstructing the Rikabganj Gurdwara wall. Beyond these immediate goals, the Akali Dal sought to establish the Gurdwaras Parbandhak Committee as a democratic institution capable of taking control of gurdwaras from mahants and continuously advocating for Sikh community rights (M. H. Singh, 1984, p.106).

Working Strategy of Shiromani Akali Dal

The Akali Dal, a semi-military group of veterans, was formed by more radical members (the "army of immortals") to recruit and train men for operations to retake gurdwaras from obstinate mahants. Despite any circumstances, the Akalis pledged to maintain nonviolence (Dhillon, 2009, p.16). Filled with missionary zeal from their growing victories, Sikh leaders began reclaiming gurdwara after gurdwara. These veteran Akalis mobilized spontaneously to capture gurdwaras, arriving in jathas (bands) organized at the district level across Punjab. Their rallying cry echoed: "*Aa gai fauj Akali, dera kar do Khali*" (The Akali army has come - evacuate the gurdwaras). During the Gurdwara Reform Movement, various Akali *jatha* hierarchies united under the collective banner of the Shiromani Akali Dal, which adopted a semi-military character while remaining non-violent and distinguished by dark blue/black turbans. The first such jatha, known as the Sewak Jatha, was organized by Sialkot residents (Gulati, 1974, pp.24-26).

Initially, no systematic mechanism existed for recruiting Akali veterans, though revolutionaries were willing to sacrifice their lives for the Akali cause. As the movement gained momentum, a formal recruitment structure emerged. Akali Jathedars and religious leaders frequently visited villages from the Akali headquarters, conducting religio-political diwans where they explained the Gurdwara Reform Movement's objectives. Recruits were organized into smaller jathas, each named after their respective regions or prominent Sikh figures, with Jathedars appointed by influential local supporters (S. Singh, 1995, p.57).

Amritsar district became the first recruitment center. At a July 1920 diwan organized by the Central Sikh League in Tarn Taran, Amar Singh Jhabal urged attendees to register as *shahids* (Akali volunteers pledged to sacrifice their lives) for reconstructing Gurdwara Rikabganj's demolished wall in Delhi. However, official reports indicate 70-80 Akalis initially volunteered to become *shahids*, though this number quickly grew to over 700 in the region. Jathedar Kartar Singh Jhabbar emerged as one of the first Akalis to organize a jatha for improving the Nankana Sahib shrine. On December 24, 1920, influential Akali members gathered at Maharani Nakain Shekhupura's Gurdwara and established the pioneering Akali Jatha Khara Sauda Bar, with Jhabbar as its Jathedar. Similar jathas soon formed across other districts, spreading throughout central Punjab. This rapid expansion marked the beginning of the Akali leadership's organized resistance against the government (Richard Gabriel Fox, 1985, pp.79-80).

During the Gurdwara Reform Movement, the Shiromani Akali Dal served as the central organizing body for the Akali *jathas*. Headquartered in Amritsar, it shared space with the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), to which it was subordinate. The Dal convened general sessions based on a five percent representation of the total membership, with each *jatha* sending delegates called *pratinidhis*. The Shiromani Akali Dal's primary functions included: maintaining records of

loyal *jatha* compositions, communicating SGPC directives to them, and organizing *jatha* deployments for community service (Richard Gabriel Fox, 1985).

Each *jatha* required at least five members, though no upper limit existed. Larger *jathas* could number in the thousands, while sub-*jathas* typically remained under fifty members. In more socially democratic *jathas*, regular members performed scriptural duties and managed economic affairs. A committee of five men, recognized as the *Panj Piaras*, assisted the *Jathedar* in standardizing entry procedures and evaluations (G. Singh, 1967).

The word *jatha* derives from the Sanskrit *yutha*, meaning "flock," "troop," or "band." In Sikh history, it denotes a group of volunteers assembled to carry out specific religious tasks. Although this concept is ancient, it gained prominence among Sikhs in the early twentieth century after the Mughals executed Banda Singh Bahadur. Its use declined during the nineteenth century but reappeared during the Gurdwara Reform Movement. Important *jathas* included: the Doaba *Jatha*, recruited from Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur districts and Kapurthala State, based in Jalandhar under *Jathedar* Piara Singh of Langeri, with about 3,000 members; the Ranjit Khalsa Malwa *Jatha*, active in Ludhiana and Ambala districts and Patiala State, led by *Jathedar* Arjan Singh with headquarters in Sekha and about 1,200 members; the Harbor Akali *Jatha* of Kapurthala State, approximately 2,000 men led by Bishan Singh of Kapurthala; the Nirbhai Akali Dal, led by *Jathedars* Sewa Singh of Khanger and Gajjan Singh, based in Ludhiana with around 2,000 men; the Gargaj *Jatha*, operating in Tarn Taran and the Majha tract under *Jathedar* Teja Singh Bhuchar, with nearly 1,500 members; the Khalsa Central Majha Diwan, also called the Shiromani Panth Milauni *Jatha*, overseen by Panj Piaras, headquartered in Kirtangarh near Sadar Police Station in Amritsar, with about 1,200 members; the Guru Ram Das *Jatha*, with *Jathedar* Amar Singh Jhabbal, initially based in Ramdas then moved to Guru-Ka-Bagh in Ajnala; the Shahidi Diwan Bar Dharowali, established in Sheikhpura, Sangla, and Manawala regions, headquartered in Dharowali in Sheikhpura district with about 500 members under *Jathedar* Sangat Singh of Dharowali; the Akali Dal Khara Sauda Bar, based in Sacha Sauda, Chuharkana in Sheikhpura district under *Jathedar* Kartar Singh Jhabbar, active in Chuharkana and Sheikhpura police jurisdictions - these two Sheikhpura *jathas* together had about 2,200 members; and the Lyallpur *Jatha*, one of the largest with at least 3,000 members divided among the district's four tehsils, led by Head *Jathedar* Tripat Singh of Chak 71-J.B. Thikriwala, who also led the Akali Dal Committee (Mohinder Singh, 2008, p.93). These *jathas* organized *morchas* (peaceful sit-in) to liberate Gurdwaras from the *mahants*.

Criteria to Join the Ranks of Shiromani Akali Dal

The Akali *Jatha*'s entry criteria required all members to believe in Guru Granth Sahib's teachings and follow the Five Ks. Typically, applicants only needed to sign an admission form. Each *jatha* maintained its own *granthis*, *ragis* (Sikh musicians), and *upadeshaks* (preachers), whose duties included village tours, conducting *diwans* (religious assemblies), promoting Akali recruitment, and spreading Akali ideology. These veterans were to be accorded the title of *shahids* (martyrs). Every district needed to maintain a specified number of supporters, with the most significant districts requiring the highest numbers. The quota for Sikh districts was set at 500 supporters. However, the exact number of enrolled *shahids* remains undocumented.

A central force of Akali volunteers called the Akali Fauj was established under the SGPC's direct control in response to local *jathas*. This force comprised courageous Sikh activists prepared to sacrifice their lives for religious reform at the Akali leadership's command. The Sikh community responded enthusiastically, surpassing the initial target of 10,000 volunteers so rapidly that the

goal had to be raised to 30,000. The Fauj organized house-to-house fundraising and sponsorship drives. Its operations were well-structured: instruction dissemination was delegated to standing committees, each *jatha* member received clear briefings about their duties, and their connection to higher leadership was precisely defined. The Bar region Akali *Jathas* in Punjab followed a similar model but with higher literacy rates. Clearly, the Akali foundation consisted of Sikh peasants and laborers committed to achieving their goals through peaceful protest. The Akalis demonstrated to India how nonviolent resistance could subdue even the most arrogant, oppressive, cunning, and insidious bureaucracy (Chauhan, 1995, p.146).

All districts of Punjab - including Amritsar, Lahore, Sheikhpura, Lyallpur, Sialkot, Gujranwala, Gujrat, Jhelum, Shahpur, Montgomery, Ferozepur, Gurdaspur, Jullundur, Hoshiarpur, Ludhiana, and Ambala - had established *jathas* for the Sikh community. Similarly, the princely states of Kapurthala, Nabha, and Nahan also formed Akali *Jathas*. Their purpose was to serve the Panth and reform gurdwaras according to the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee's directives. The Shiromani Akali Dal comprised delegates from all affiliated *jathas*, with each *jatha* entitled to send six delegates per 100 members. It maintained an Executive Committee of 41 members, including five office-bearers who also served as *Panj Piaras* (the beloved ones). Income primarily came from two sources: public donations and *daswandh* contributions (a tenth of each *jatha's* income). Members attending meetings covered their own railway expenses.

Conclusion

The role of the Shiromani Akali Dal during the Gurdwara Reform Movement (1920-1925) was demonstrated as a successful model of religious revivalism and political resistance. It introduced a religio-political renaissance among the Sikh community in colonial Punjab. Through a disciplined network of Akali *Jathas* and non-violent Morcha politics, SAD was not only secured the control of Gurdwaras from *Mahants* but also institutionalized the Sikh identity by establishing Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). Its dual policy of structured grassroots level mobilization and political resistance transformed into approval of The Sikh Gurdwaras Act, 1925. The SAD is the best-case study to understand how a religio-political organization, representing a minority community, can negotiate and protect the rights of their people under an oppressive structure. Archival sources suggested that faith, power, and disciplined non-violence collective action were the key factors in success of the Shiromani Akali Dal.

Conflict of Interest

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