

Germany, Turkey, and China also failed to provide the Gadar men with enough resources to be successful.

Although the movement was suppressed, it provided a foundation for the Akali movement which followed a few years later. The Gadar leaders were especially prominent among the Babbar Akālīs (ਬੱਬਰ ਅਕਾਲੀ).

Adapted from: Harbans Singh, The Encyclopedia of Sikhism

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways was it difficult for the Gadar men to be successful in their mission?
2. What would you have done if you were in “their shoes” or in their place? How would you act?
3. Do you believe the Gadar men received a fair punishment or fair trial for what they were doing? What would you have done if you were the judge?
4. (Note to Teacher) Feel free to ask your own additional questions.

Homework:

The Gadar men faced a great deal of discrimination when they came to the United States and Canada. Interview a Sikh person who currently resides in the United States, Canada, or the United Kingdom and came to the country in the 1970s or earlier. Ask them about what types of discrimination they faced and share it with your teacher and classmates. If you cannot find someone who came in the 1970s imagine a dialogue and write your thoughts about what it may have been like.

Brief Introduction to SGPC

The Shromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Committee (ਸ਼੍ਰੋਮਣੀ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ ਪ੍ਰਬੰਧਕ ਕਮੇਟੀ) is an organization in India that is responsible for the taking care of the *Gurduārās* (ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ). It is also responsible for the Harimandar Sāhib in Ammritsar (ਹਰਿਮੰਦਰ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤਸਰ). There is also a Dillī Gurduārā Prabandhak Committee (ਦਿੱਲੀ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ ਪ੍ਰਬੰਧਕ ਕਮੇਟੀ) that is responsible for the Dillī *Gurduārās*. These committees have officials picked through regular elections at Harimandar Sāhib in which all Sikhs (ਸਿੱਖ) may participate. The SGPC has a chairman, treasurer, and a general secretary. The SGPC maintains all of the physical, financial, and religious aspects of the *Gurduārās*. It also helps to maintain the precious and sacred artifacts belonging to the Sikh *Gurūs* (ਗੁਰੂ).

Brief history on how the SGPC was formed and the Gurduārā Reform Movement

The year 1920 was significant in Sikh history. The emerging Akālī (ਅਕਾਲੀ) leadership summoned a general assembly of Sikhs holding different opinions on 15 November 1920, in front of the Akāl Takht (ਅਕਾਲ ਤਖਤ). They were to elect a representative committee of Sikhs to control the Harimandar Sāhib complex and other historical *Gurduārās*. Two days before this proposed meeting the British government set up its own committee, consisting of 36 Sikhs, to manage the Harimandar Sāhib. Ignoring the British government, the Sikhs held their scheduled meeting as planned and elected a bigger committee consisting of 175 members which they named Shromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Committee (ਸ਼੍ਰੋਮਣੀ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ ਪ੍ਰਬੰਧਕ ਕਮੇਟੀ) (SGPC). The members the British government had appointed were included in this committee as well. Harbans Singh Aṭārī (ਹਰਬੰਸ ਸਿੰਘ ਅਟਾਰੀ) became the vice president and Sundar Singh Rāmgarīā (ਸੁੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਰਾਮਗੜੀਆ) became secretary of the committee. Master Tārā Singh (ਮਾਸਟਰ ਤਾਰਾ ਸਿੰਘ) was also one of the 175 members elected to the committee. The formation of SGPC provided a focal point for the movement for the reformation of *Gurduārās*. This committee began to control the Sikh *Gurduārās* in India one by one. However, trouble arose when the *Mahants* (ਮਹੰਤ) (a name given to the group of people who were controlling the *Gurduārās* at the time and had lost their respect among the Sikhs because of their inappropriate behaviors in the *Gurduārās*) would refuse to give up control and sometimes there was violence between the two groups. There were several arrests of the Akālī leaders. In fact, the government of Pañjāb, in October 1923, declared the SGPC and the Shromaṇī Akālī Dal (ਸ਼੍ਰੋਮਣੀ ਅਕਾਲੀ ਦਲ) and various *Jathās* (ਜਥਾ) ‘unlawful associations’. However, these associations or committees continued to work with full force even with this mandate.

Around the year 1925, Malcolm Hailey, the governor of Pañjāb (ਪੰਜਾਬ), displayed his willingness to assist the Sikhs in taking possession of all the important *Gurduārās* in the province through a five-member committee constituted by the Sikh members of the legislative council. Hailey presented a draft of a new Gurduārā Bill to the Akālī leaders. They looked over the bill carefully and decided that it met most of their demands. The bill was passed into law on 28 July 1925, by the Governor General of India after its ratification by the Pañjāb legislative council. This important bill came to be known as the Gurduārā Act of 1925 which allowed for a Gurduārā Board elected by the Sikhs to become the caretaker of all important Sikh *Gurduārās*. At the first meeting of the Gurduārā Board, the Board passed a resolution that its name be changed to Shromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Committee, which was also accepted by the government of that time. Finally, at this time the Pañjāb government withdrew its orders declaring the Shromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Committee and other Akālī organs as unlawful associations and recognized the SGPC as a representative body of the Sikhs. The Sikh Gurduārā Bill met most of the demands of the Sikhs, but the government was willing to release Akālī prisoners only on certain conditions. Among the prominent Akālīs, Mahtab Singh (ਮਹਤਾਬ ਸਿੰਘ) and

Giānī Sher Singh (ਗਿਆਨੀ ਸ਼ੇਰ ਸਿੰਘ), along with about twenty others accepted the conditional release. However, Master Tārā Singh, Bābā Khaṛak Singh (ਬਾਬਾ ਖੜਕ ਸਿੰਘ) and Tejā Singh Samundarī (ਤੇਜਾ ਸਿੰਘ ਸਮੁੰਦਰੀ) and sixteen others refused the conditional release saying it was an attack on the self-respect of the Sikhs. The Pañjāb government failed to prove any of the charges against these Akālīs so they were released unconditionally a few months later. After these releases there was a division in the Akālīs groups because of those who accepted the release conditionally or unconditionally. One of the groups came to be known as the Rāi Bahādur Pārṭī (ਰਾਇ ਬਹਾਦੁਰ ਪਾਰਟੀ), with Mahtāb Singh as their president. The other group was still known as the Akālī Party and when they won the majority in the newly elected SPGC they elected Khaṛak Singh as the President and Master Tārā Singh as their Vice President. Most of the responsibility fell on the shoulders of Master Tārā Singh since Bābā Khaṛak Singh had not yet been released.

With these divisions among the Akālī party and strong disagreements about their decisions of accepting and rejecting the conditional release, the Akālī party lost its original spirit and unity. “Losing sight of their original aims of reform of the *Gurduārās* and advancement of the Sikhs in educational, religious, and social spheres, the Akālī leadership became enmeshed in mutual wrangles. Never again has it regained similar power and prestige as it enjoyed during the heyday of the Akālī movement.”

Adapted from: The Akālī movement by Mahindar Singh

Additional Resources

- Singh, Harbans, *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*
- Singh, Mahindar. *The Akālī Movement*

Sikh History: The Akālī Movement - 1920

The Gurduārā Reform Movement, also known as Gurduārā Agitation, is the movement in which the Sikhs participated in a long drawn-out campaign for the liberation of their *Gurduārās* in the early twenties of the twentieth century. The campaign, which elicited enthusiastic support, especially from the rural masses, took the form of peaceful agitation-marches, *Divāns* (ਦਿਵਾਨ), and demonstrations for Sikhs to assert their right to manage their *Gurduārās*. This led to a series of critical episodes in which their powers of suffering without questioning were severely tested by government suppression. During this movement, Akālīs (ਅਕਾਲੀ), as the protesters were known, succeeded in their object, and the control of the *Gurduārās* was vested, through legislation, in a representative committee of the Sikhs. The State, under Ranjit Singh (ਰਣਜੀਤ ਸਿੰਘ) (1780-1839), had stopped interfering with the management of *Gurduārās*. It endowed the more prominent among them with land grants and other gifts but let the control remain in the hands of sects such as the Udāsī (ਉਦਾਸੀ), or hereditary *Mahants* (ਮਹੰਤ), who had assumed charge of them since the days when Sikhs, under pressure of Mughal persecution, had been forced to seek safety in remote hills and deserts. A kind of professional system, contrary to Sikh religious structure, had developed over the generations. Some of its sinister aspects became apparent soon after the fall of the Sikh kingdom. Most of the clergy had become neglectful of their religious office. They had diverted *Gurduārā* assets, including lands, to their own enhancement, and their lives were not free from luxury. The simple form of Sikh service had been replaced in the *Gurduārās* by extravagant ceremonies. This was repugnant to Sikhs who had freshly been educated by the teachings of the Singh Sabhā. The reaction through which they had passed, led them to revolt against the mal-administration of their *Gurduārās*.

Their central Gurduārā, Harimandar Sāhib, Ammritsar, was controlled by the British Deputy Commissioner through a Sikh manager whom he appointed. There were idols installed within the temple precincts. Paṇḍits (ਪੰਡਿਤ) and astrologers sat on the premises working their trade unchecked. Pilgrims from the lower classes were not allowed inside the Harimandar before 9 o'clock in the morning. This was a mockery of Sikhī which permitted neither caste nor image worship. Vaguely, the feeling had been prevalent among the Sikhs since almost the advent of the British that the administration of Harimandar Sāhib in Ammritsar was far from satisfactory. The religious ritual practices ran counter to many details of the teachings of the *Gurūs*. One loud voice of protest was that of Thākūr Singh Sandhanvālā (ਠਾਕੁਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਸੰਧਨਵਾਲੀਆ), who was a member of the Srī Darbār Sāhib Committee (ਸ੍ਰੀ ਦਰਬਾਰ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਕਮੇਟੀ) in the seventies of the last century. The Khālsā Divān (ਖਾਲਸਾ ਦਿਵਾਨ), Lāhaur (ਲਾਹੌਰ), at its session (6-8 April 1907), proposed that the manager of Harimandar Sāhib appointed by the government be removed and a committee of Sikh chiefs be appointed in his place. Likewise, the Khālsā Divān, Mājhā (ਮਾਝਾ), meeting at Tarn Tāran (ਤਰਨ ਤਾਰਨ) on 10 April 1907, had recorded its concern about the management of the *Gurduārā*. On 12 October 1920, a meeting of Sikh lower castes, sponsored by teachers and students of the Khālsā College was held in Jaliānwālā Bāg (ਜਲਿਆਂਵਾਲਾ ਬਾਗ) at Ammritsar. The following morning some of them were taken to Harimandar, but the priests refused to accept the Kaṛāh Prashād (ਕੜਾਹ ਪ੍ਰਸ਼ਾਦ) that they had brought as offering and to say the Ardās (ਅਰਦਾਸ) on their behalf. Their supporters protested. A compromise was at last reached and it was decided that the *Gurū's* word be sought. The Gurū Granth Sāhib (ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ) was, as is the custom, opened at random and the first verse on the page to be read was:

ਨਿਗੁਣਿਆ ਨੋ ਅਪੇ ਬਖਸਿ ਲਏ ਭਾਈ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਕੀ ਸੇਵਾ ਲਾਇ॥

Nigunīā no āpe bakhsi lae bhāī satigur kī sevā lāi.

Vahgurū receives into grace (even) those without virtues, and puts them in the path of holy service. (SGGS, 638)

The *Gurū's* verdict was clearly in favor of those whom the *Pujārīs* (ਪੁਜਾਰੀ) had refused to accept as full members of the community. This was a triumph for reformist Sikhs. The devotees then marched towards Takht Akāl Buṅgā (ਤਖਤ ਅਕਾਲ ਬੁੰਗਾ) in front of Harimandar Sāhib. The priests deserted the Takht and the visiting pilgrims appointed a representative committee of twenty-five for its management. This was the beginning of the movement for the liberation of the *Gurduārās*. The Akālīs began to prepare for retrieving the *Gurduārās* from the control of the *Mahants* or clergy-cum-hereditary custodians. With a view to establishing a central committee of administration, a representative assembly of Sikhs from all walks of life was called by the new *Jathedār* of Takht Akāl Buṅgā on 15 November 1920. Two days before the proposed conference, the government set up its own committee consisting of thirty-six Sikhs to manage the Harimandar Sāhib. This committee was nominated by the Lt-Governor of the Pañjāb at the insistence of Mahārājā Bhupindar Singh of Paṭiālā (ਮਹਾਰਾਜਾ ਭੁਪਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ, ਪਟਿਆਲਾ) who had been approached by Bhāi Jodh Singh (ਭਾਈ ਜੋਧ ਸਿੰਘ) and a few of his faculty colleagues at Khālsā College, Amritsar, to intervene between the government and the Sikhs. The Sikhs held their scheduled meeting on 15 November and formed a committee of 175, including the thirty-six official nominees, designating it Shromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Committee (ਸ਼੍ਰੋਮਣੀ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ ਪ੍ਰਬੰਧਕ ਕਮੇਟੀ).

The first session of the committee was held at the Akāl Takht on 12 December 1920. Sundar Singh Majiṭhīā (ਸੁੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਮਜਿਠੀਆ), Harbans Singh Aṭārī (ਹਰਬੰਸ ਸਿੰਘ ਅਟਾਰੀ) and Bhāi Jodh Singh (ਭਾਈ ਜੋਧ ਸਿੰਘ) were elected president, vice-president and secretary, respectively. The more radical elements organized a semi-military corps of volunteers known as the Akālī Dal (ਅਕਾਲੀ ਦਲ) (Army of Immortals). The Akālī Dal was to raise and train men for 'action' to take over *Gurduārās* from the *Mahants*. This also signaled the appearance of a Gurmukhī newspaper, also called Akālī. The formation of the Shromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Committee and the Shromaṇī Akālī Dal sped up the movement for the reformation of Sikh religious institutions and endowments. Under pressure of Sikh opinion, backed frequently by demonstration of strength, the *Mahants* began yielding possession of *Gurduārā* properties to elected committees and agreed to become paid *Granthīs* (ਗ੍ਰੰਥੀ). Several *Gurduārās* had thus come under the reformists' control even before the Shromaṇī Committee and the Akālī Dal had been established. However, the transition was not so smooth where the priests were strongly entrenched or where the government actively helped them to resist mass pressure. At Tarn Tāran (ਤਰਨ ਤਾਰਨ), near Amritsar, a batch of *Gurduārā* functionaries attacked an unwary delegation of reformers who had been invited to the *Gurduārā* for negotiations. One of them, Hazārā Singh (ਹਜ਼ਾਰਾ ਸਿੰਘ), of Alādīnpur (ਅਲਾਦੀਨਪੁਰ), fell victim to the violence on 20 January 1921. He died the following day and became the first *Shahīd* (ਸ਼ਹੀਦ) in the cause of *Gurduārā* reform. On another occasion, Akālī Hukam Singh (ਹੁਕਮ ਸਿੰਘ), of Vasāo Kot (ਵਸਾਓ ਕੋਟ), succumbed to his injuries on 4 February 1921.

Nankāṇā Sāhib (ਨਨਕਾਣਾ ਸਾਹਿਬ), the birthplace of Gurū Nānak Sāhib (ਗੁਰੂ ਨਾਨਕ ਸਾਹਿਬ), was the scene of violence on a much larger scale. The custodian, Narāiṇ Dās (ਨਰਾਇਣ ਦਾਸ), the wealthiest of the *Mahants* had a most unsavory reputation, and his stewardship of the Nankāṇā Sāhib *Gurduārās* had started many a scandal. On the morning of 20 February 1921, as a *Jathā* (ਜਥਾ), or band of 150 Akālīs, came to the *Gurduārā*, the private army of Narāiṇ Dās fell upon them, raining bullets all around. The *Jathā* leader, Bhāi Lachman Singh (ਭਾਈ ਲਛਮਣ ਸਿੰਘ), of Dhārovālī (ਧਾਰੋਵਾਲੀ), was struck down sitting in attendance of the Gurū Granth Sāhib. Bhāi Dalīp Singh (ਭਾਈ ਦਲੀਪ ਸਿੰਘ), a much-respected Sikh leader who was well known to the Mahant came to intercede with him to stop the carnage, but was killed with a shot from his pistol. Many members of the *Jathā* fell in the indiscriminate firing by the Mahant's men. The news of the massacre caused widespread gloom. Among those who came to

Nankāṇā to express their sense of shock was, Sir Edward Maclagan, the British Lt-Governor of the Pañjāb. The possession of the Gurduārā was made over by the government to a committee of seven Sikhs headed by Harbans Singh of Aṭāri, vice-president of the Shromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Committee.

Another crisis arose as the Pañjāb Government seized, on 7 November 1921, the keys of the Harimandar Sāhib treasury. The Shromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Committee lodged a strong protest and called upon the Sikhs the world over to convene meetings to condemn the government action. Further means of recording resentment included a decision for Sikhs to observe a Haṭāl (ਹੜਤਾਲ), i.e., to strike work, on the day the Prince of Wales, who was coming out on a tour, landed on Indian shores. They were also forbidden to participate in any function connected with the Prince's visit. To fill the British jails, volunteers, draped in black and singing Gurbāṇī, marched forth in batches. Ex-servicemen threw up their pensions and joined Akālī ranks. Under pressure of the growing agitation, the government gave way, and on 19 January 1922 a court official surrendered the bunch of keys, wrapped in a piece of red cloth, to Khaṛak Singh (ਖੜਕ ਸਿੰਘ), president of the Shromaṇī Gurduārā Prabandhak Committee. M.K. Gāṁdhī (ਐਮ. ਕੇ. ਗਾਂਧੀ) sent a wire saying, "First decisive battle for India's freedom won". Gurū kā Bāg (ਗੁਰੂ ਕਾ ਬਾਗ), 20 km north of Ammritsar, witnessed a Morcā (ਮੋਰਚਾ) most typical of the series in the Akālī movement. On 9 August 1922, the police arrested five Sikhs on charges of trespass; they had gone to gather firewood from the Gurduārā's land for Gurū kā Laṅgar (ਗੁਰੂ ਕਾ ਲੰਗਰ), the community kitchen. The following day, the arrested Sikhs were summarily tried and sentenced to six months rigorous imprisonment. Undeterred, the Sikhs continued coming in batches every day to hew wood from the site, courting arrest and prosecution. After 30 August, the police adopted a stern policy to terrorize the volunteers. Those who came to cut firewood from Gurū kā Bāg were beaten up in a merciless manner until they lay senseless on the ground. The Sikhs suffered all this stoically and went day by day in larger numbers to submit themselves to the beating. A committee appointed by the Indian National Congress to visit Ammritsar, applauded the Akālīs and censured the police for atrocities committed by it. Rev C. F. Andrews, a Christian missionary, came on 12 September 1922, and was deeply moved by the behavior of the Akālī passive resisters.

At his insistence, Sir Edward Maclagan, the Lt-Governor of the Pañjāb, arrived at Gurū kā Bāg (13 September) and ordered the beatings to be stopped. Four days later, the police retired from the scene. By then 5,605 Akālīs had been arrested, with 936 hospitalized. The Akālīs got possession of Gurduārā Gurū kā Bāg along with the disputed land. The incident at Gurū kā Bāg excited religious fervor to a degree unapproached during the 70 years of British rule. The judicial trials of the volunteers were followed with close interest and, when those convicted were being removed to jails to serve their sentences, mammoth crowds greeted them en route. On 30 October 1922, many men and women laid themselves on the rail track at Pañjā Sāhib in an attempt to stop a train to offer refreshments to Akālī prisoners being escorted to Naushahirā (ਨੌਸ਼ਹਿਰਾ) jail. Two Sikhs, Pratāp Singh (ਪ੍ਰਤਾਪ ਸਿੰਘ) and Karam Singh (ਕਰਮ ਸਿੰਘ), were crushed to death before the engine driver could pull up. Not all Sikhs accepted the cult of non-violence to which the Shromaṇī Committee had committed itself. The Nankāṇā massacre and the behavior of the police at Gurū kā Bāg induced some to organize an underground militant movement. These militants, who called themselves Babbar (ਬੱਬਰ) or Lion Akālīs, were largely drawn from the Gadar party and army soldiers on leave. Babbar violence was, however, of short duration. By the summer of 1923, most of the Babbars had been apprehended. The trial, conducted in camera, began inside Lāhaur Central Jail on 15 August 1923, and was presided over by an English judge. Of the 91 accused, two died in jail during trial, 34 were acquitted, six including Jathedār Kishan Singh Gargajj (ਜਥੇਦਾਰ ਕਿਸ਼ਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਗੜਗੱਜ), were awarded death penalty, while the remaining 49 were sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment.