



THE AKALI MOVEMENT AND JAITO DA MORCHA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW. – PAPER - I



An Akhand Path of Guru Granth Sahib was organized at the Gurudwara Gangsar Sahib in Jaito from September 25 to 27, 1923.

The Akali Movement, a significant part of India's struggle for independence, holds a special place in the history of Punjab and Sikhism. Rooted in religious and political aspirations, the movement was led by Sikh leaders and reformers who sought to free the Gurdwaras (Sikh temples) from the control of corrupt priests and the British authorities. At its heart, the movement revolved around the desire for Sikh autonomy and the preservation of Sikh religious practices, often entangled with India's larger struggle for independence from British rule. One of the most important and tragic chapters of the Akali Movement is **Jaito Da Morcha** (1924), an event that left a deep imprint on Sikh history and Indian nationalism.

Historical Background

The early 20th century saw the rise of the Akali Dal and the **Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC)**, both founded in 1920. The SGPC aimed to manage and oversee Sikh Gurdwaras, freeing them from British-backed priests who did not respect Sikh customs or traditions. This was part of a broader **Gurdwara Reform Movement** (1920-1925) that sought to reclaim control of Sikh religious places, bringing them under the management of the Sikh community itself.

Maharaja Ripudaman Singh and His Struggle

The roots of **Jaito Da Morcha** can be traced to the deposition of **Maharaja Ripudaman Singh** of Nabha by the British authorities. Ripudaman Singh was a well-regarded Sikh ruler who supported



the Akali Movement and was known for his strong anti-British stance. His outspokenness on Sikh rights and Indian independence led to his removal from power on July 7, 1923, which angered the Sikh community. This excommunication of Ripudaman Singh, an act widely perceived as unjust, sparked unrest among Sikhs, particularly in Nabha, where the Maharaja had ruled.

The Sikh community, viewing Ripudaman Singh as a symbol of resistance, organized protests and demonstrations. The immediate trigger for the confrontation in Jaito was the **Akhand Path** (continuous reading of the Guru Granth Sahib) organized at **Gurdwara Gangsar Sahib** from September 25 to 27, 1923, to pray for the Maharaja's return. When the British-appointed administrator of Nabha interrupted the Akhand Path and arrested Sikh priests, the Sikh community intensified their protests.

Jaito Da Morcha: The Spark

After the interruption of the Akhand Path and the arrest of the priests, the SGPC and the wider Sikh community took up the cause. In response, the SGPC sent jathas (groups of protesters) to Gurdwara Gangsar Sahib to continue the prayer, despite heavy restrictions imposed by the British authorities. These jathas were peaceful, unarmed, and determined to assert their right to worship.

By February 1924, the SGPC had ramped up its efforts, and on **February 9, 1924**, a jatha of **500 Sikhs** set out from **Akal Takht Sahib** in Amritsar towards Jaito. This jatha, in particular, was the focus of a carefully laid British trap. The British administrator, determined to stop the marchers, barricaded the area using **100 bullock carts, barbed-wire fencing**, and stationed armed soldiers from the states of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, and Faridkot. To further isolate the protesters, they were surrounded by local crowds armed with sticks, in an attempt to stage a "clash" that would shift the blame away from the British.

The Gurdwara Gangsar Sahib Massacre

On **February 21, 1924**, as the jatha peacefully approached Gurdwara Gangsar Sahib, British forces opened fire without provocation, leading to a massacre that resulted in the deaths of around **150 Sikhs** and the wounding of over **300 others**. The brutal nature of the unprovoked attack shocked the entire nation and drew widespread condemnation. The incident came to be known as **Jaito Da Morcha**, a term that symbolizes both the resilience and the suffering of the Sikh community in their quest for religious and political rights.

Despite the massacre, the Sikh protesters did not abandon their cause. The SGPC continued to send jathas to Jaito, and it took **17 jathas** and several months of protest before the British were forced to remove their barricades from the Gurdwara in **July 1925**. The unyielding spirit of the Sikhs during this period earned them admiration from other Indian communities, and even the **Congress Party**, under the leadership of **Jawaharlal Nehru**, voiced their support for the Sikh cause. Nehru himself was arrested in Jaito, adding a national dimension to the agitation.

Master Tara Singh and the Akali Movement

One of the most prominent leaders of the Akali Movement was **Master Tara Singh**, a figure synonymous with Sikh political activism during the first half of the 20th century. Tara Singh played a crucial role in organizing the protests during the Gurdwara Reform Movement and was one of the



founding members of the SGPC and **Shiromani Akali Dal**. His influence during this period was immense, and his leadership helped guide the Sikh community through some of the most challenging moments in their struggle for religious and political autonomy.

Master Tara Singh's leadership was also pivotal in negotiating the **Punjab Suba Movement**, which sought the creation of a Punjabi-speaking state for Sikhs within India. His activism extended far beyond the boundaries of religion and was instrumental in shaping the political landscape of Punjab and its integration into independent India.

The SGPC Act of 1925

The culmination of the **Gurdwara Reform Movement** was the passage of the **Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925** by the British government. This law gave legal recognition to the SGPC, allowing the body to officially manage Sikh Gurdwaras. It marked a significant victory for the Sikh community, as it restored control over their religious places and provided a formal structure for their management. The act also legitimized the role of the SGPC as the **apex religious body of Sikhs**, which it remains to this day.

The **Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925** is remembered as one of the key achievements of the Akali Movement. It established a precedent for Sikh self-governance within the framework of the British-ruled Indian subcontinent, serving as an important milestone in the community's ongoing struggle for autonomy.

Legacy of Jaito Da Morcha and the Akali Movement

The events surrounding **Jaito Da Morcha** and the broader **Akali Movement** continue to resonate in Sikh and Indian history. The movement not only helped restore Sikh control over their religious institutions but also played a significant role in the Indian independence movement by highlighting the community's grievances against British rule. The sacrifices made by the protesters at Jaito, as well as the leadership of figures like Master Tara Singh and Maharaja Ripudaman Singh, remain an enduring symbol of Sikh resilience and determination.

Its an example of the freedom struggle to know, how religious and political movements can intertwine, shaping the trajectory of Indian history. The Akali Movement, with its emphasis on non-violence, civil disobedience, and religious autonomy, holds significant value in understanding the broader national struggle for independence. The **Jaito Da Morcha**, in particular, offers insight into the nature of colonial repression and the ways in which communities like the Sikhs resisted, persevered, and ultimately triumphed in their quest for justice.

MAIN PRACTICE QUESTIONS.

1. Describe the significance of Jaito Da Morcha in the context of the Akali Movement and its impact on the Sikh community's struggle for religious and political rights.



2. Discuss the role of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh and Master Tara Singh in the Gurdwara Reform Movement, highlighting how their leadership influenced the Sikh struggle against British rule and the eventual passage of the Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925.

ANSWER GUIDELINES

1. Describe the significance of Jaito Da Morcha in the context of the Akali Movement and its impact on the Sikh community's struggle for religious and political rights.

Introduction:

- Briefly introduce Jaito Da Morcha (February 21, 1924) and its place within the broader Akali Movement.
- Mention the Gurdwara Reform Movement (1920-1925) and the context of religious rights under British colonial rule.

Main Body:

- **Cause of the agitation:** Explain the deposition of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh by the British and how it angered the Sikh community. Discuss the interruption of the Akhand Path at Gurdwara Gangsar Sahib by the British-appointed administrator and the Sikh community's reaction.
- **Course of events:** Discuss the peaceful jathas sent by the SGPC and the British response, which included heavy barricading and the unprovoked firing on February 21, 1924, killing around 150 Sikhs.
- **Impact on the Sikh community:** Highlight the religious and emotional significance of the incident. How did it strengthen the Sikh community's resolve to regain control of their Gurdwaras?
- **Broader national impact:** Note the support the movement received from the Indian National Congress, including Jawaharlal Nehru's arrest, and how it contributed to the national struggle for independence.

Conclusion:

- Summarize the event's significance in securing Sikh rights and its place as a key moment in the Akali Movement.



2. Discuss the role of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh and Master Tara Singh in the Gurdwara Reform Movement, highlighting how their leadership influenced the Sikh struggle against British rule and the eventual passage of the Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925.

Introduction:

- Briefly introduce Maharaja Ripudaman Singh and Master Tara Singh as key figures in the Sikh political and religious struggle during British colonial rule.

Main Body:

- **Maharaja Ripudaman Singh's Role:** Explain Ripudaman Singh's anti-British stance and his removal from the Nabha throne, which triggered unrest among Sikhs. Discuss his influence as a symbol of Sikh resistance.
- **Master Tara Singh's Leadership:** Discuss how Master Tara Singh emerged as a leader of the Akali Movement, his role in organizing protests and leading the SGPC during the Gurdwara Reform Movement. His contribution to the Akali Dal and leadership in non-violent protests is significant.
- **The Gurdwara Reform Movement (1920-1925):** Describe how both leaders contributed to the movement that sought to free Gurdwaras from corrupt priests backed by the British.
- **Passage of the Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925:** Highlight how their leadership and persistence led to the legal recognition of SGPC through the Sikh Gurdwaras Act, which gave the community control over its religious institutions.

Conclusion:

- Summarize the importance of both leaders in shaping the Sikh community's political and religious rights and their influence on broader Indian independence efforts.