

ੴ ਵਾਹਿਗੁਰੂ ਜੀ ਕੀ ਫਤਹਿ ॥ Publication No.
358

Babbar Akali Movement

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Published by : Sikh Missionary College (Regd.)
Typesetting by : Surjit Computers, Jalandhar. Ph. : 0181-2432046
Printed at : Bright Printers, Jalandhar. Ph. : 0181-2292202

Available at :

SIKH MISSIONARY COLLEGE (REGD.)

1051/14, Field Ganj, Ludhiana - 141 008. Phone : 0161-2663452

Website : www.sikhmissionarycollege.net

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Delhi Sub-Office : C-135, Mansarover Garden,
New Delhi-110015 Ph. : 011-25413986

and from all the Circles of Sikh Missionary College (Regd.)

Published by
SIKH MISSIONARY COLLEGE (REGD.)
LUDHIANA

BABBAR AKALI MOVEMENT

The Sikh nation had made substantial contributions in the freedom struggle of India. In this struggle, Sikhs had made maximum sacrifices. They were hanged till dead, transported for life to Andaman Islands, under went imprisonment in jails and bore many other hardships. But sadly, their sacrifices have not been given due place in the history after achievement of Independence. Instead, all movements commenced and progressed by Sikhs were branded as pure religious thus reducing their contributions and sacrifices to a pittance.

One amongst many such movements was a strong Babbar Akali Movement of which British Government in India was highly scared. Even the British officials sitting in London were equally uncomfortable and jittery. But, if we read the history of Indian freedom struggle, the brave Babbar Akali's do not find a mention anywhere. And if one comes across a few lines, it would be just a few words of customary eye wash.

Most of the members of this movement belonged to *Doaba* area of Panjab (Area between river Beas and river Satluj). Despite all their efforts, the British Government could not establish their authority and influence in this area. This truth is supported by the fact that when in 1923, the Minister of Indian Affairs in the British Parliament replied to a question that the local administration of *Doaba* has become non-effective, a member of the Parliament suggested that there was no point bearing loss of loyal subjects and therefore the Districts of Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur should be annexed with some Indian states since both the districts

were too much for the British Government to handle.

In order to caste away the yoke of slavery of the Britishers from the shoulders of the Indians, and drawing on the inspiration from the life struggle of Sikh Gurus, this movement had been commenced with a definite programme and motive. During the litigation proceedings against these Babbars, they revealed the account of their activities as under :

“Whatever we did, it was not meant to save our lives. We had reformed the enemies of the *Panth* and those who had deceived and harmed it. Our brothers were fighting a peaceful battle. We have fought battles as were fought by Sri Guru Hargobind Sahib and Guru Gobind Singh Ji. We have done nothing against the tenets of Sikhism. When our Gurus did not care for their lives, who were true emperors and masters of the two worlds, what concern could the death have for us.....”

The above statement was published in March 1925 in *Pardesi* newspaper of the movement.

It was *Babbar Akalis* who kissed the noose smilingly. A single Babbar Akali achieved martyrdom fighting against many white soldiers. If they pledged not to be caught alive, they fulfilled it with death. They relived the ancient history of the Sikhs, when people had started asking how was it possible for a handful of Sikhs to fight and face large Mughal armies.

Before going into the details of this movement, it would be better if we study its background in brief.

Background.

The Nankana Sahib and Guru Ka Bagh agitations during the Gurudwara Reform Movement were such historical events that compelled the Babbars to raise arms. The fire of revenge was raging in their hearts since long. But what inflamed their sentiments were the state policies towards their religion, economy and polity.

The Britishers had managed to take possession of the *Sikh Raj* adopting certain policies and with the active help of the Dogras. In 1871, the Namdharis expressed the Sikh fearlessness and grandeur in Panjab with courage and bravery. In order to suppress the anger, maintain communication with the common people and assuage their sentiments, the British administration founded Congress in 1885. The economic life of the people kept deteriorating particularly of the farmers of Panjab who had never pawned their land. By 1878, all their land holdings had been mortgaged. By 1919, 83% owners of the land were caught in the grip of the money lenders. The law related to the Urban population that came into force in 1905-07 broke the back of the farmers. As a protest, Gadar Movement rose which was suppressed.

In 1911, the British government shifted their capital from Calcutta to Delhi. For constructing an official building in the vicinity of Gurudwara Rakab Ganj at Delhi, they brought down one of its walls. It sent a strong wave of anger in the hearts of the people.

The innocent passengers of ship Kama Gata Maru most of whom were Sikhs, coming from Canada were brutally fired at on reaching Budge Budge port. It awakened the

anger in the hearts of the people which subsided soon. The first World War ended. The reward that the Sikh soldiers received for their valour and bravery was that a majority of them were released from service and sent home. The released soldiers saw the pitiable plight of their farmer brethren at the hands of British Government. The bloody massacre of Jallianwala Bagh took place on the Baisakhi day of 1919. Instead of punishing General Dyer, the officer responsible for the massacre, he was praised for his deeds by the British Government. The Government also played a comic drama of making him a Sikh at Sri Harmandir Sahib. This enraged the Sikh *Sangat* beyond control.

For how long could Sikhs bear the economic destitution, disrespect of their religious places and a challenge to their self pride? The Sikh sentiments had been well ingrained in them by the Singh Sabha Movement. What added to their zeal was a newspaper named 'Akali' that started appearing from Lahore in 1920. Its fearless and frank articles woke the nation up. On 5th October, 1920, the Gurudwara Babey di Ber at Sialkot was freed from the clutches of the *Mahants*. It was handed over to a locally formed committee. On 12th October 1920, the responsibilities of both Sri Akal Takht and Sri Harmandir Sahib was taken over from the *Mahants* and handed over to a local committee to manage the affairs. On 15th-16th November 1920, a big *Panthic* gathering took place and Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) came into being. On 14th December 1920, Shiromani Akali Dal was formed. The Akali Satyagraha struggle kept on progressing peacefully till the last week of December 1920 and early part of January 1921. Many Gurudwaras were freed from the control of Mahants and

brought under the management of *Panthic Committees*.

The British Government never wanted the Sikhs to be aware and the control of the religious places be exercised by a class of people. They wanted the management of the Gurudwaras according to their pleasure and wanted their loyalists to keep a hold on them. Thus they started supporting the *Mahants* and winning over the progressive and educated Sikhs by granting them favours. The results of such manoeuvres were drastic.

On 26th January 1921, some *Jathas* went to Taran Taaran to reform the *priests* and *Mahants*. They talked to them peacefully requesting them to bring in much needed reforms. But during the night, these priests, *Mahants* and their goons launched a murderous attack on the peaceful Akalis. 17 Akalis were badly wounded. Two out of these died later. The priests absconded from the Gurudwaras but a wave of tremor went through the Sikhs. On 21st February 1921, the historic happening of Nankana Sahib took place where more than hundred Sikhs achieved martyrdom. When the enthusiasm of Sikhs could not be suppressed, the management of Gurudwara Nankana Sahib was handed over to the Sikhs. This event laid bare the conspiracy of the British government. A common man was sure that it could not have been the conspiracy of the *Mahants*. The government officials surely have a hand in it. (It has been revealed by now that Mr. King who was the commissioner then had sent a confidential letter to an arms dealer of Lahore that *Mahants* be supplied with arms) Babbar Akali was a miraculous answer to the anti-democratic sentiments. They were never ready to compromise on the principle of peaceful agitation because

they were aware according to the Guru's teachings that all peaceful processes too have a limit. Thereafter the use of weapon is righteous. Therefore they adopted armed answer to the oppression and tyranny and preached it too.

Commencement of the Movement.

A Sikh educational Conference was held at Hoshiarpur on 19th, 20th and 21st March 1921. Some radical Sikhs assembled separately who decided to sort out the *Mahants* responsible for the dastardly events of Nankana Sahib, the government officials who were at the back of it all and their sycophants. S. Bela Singh and Ganda Singh were assigned the task of killing Mr. Bowering, the Superintendent of Police. S. Tota Singh Peshawari procured some weapons and hand grenades from Sirhind. Seven revolvers were obtained from the arsenal of Ambala Cantonment. On 23rd May, both of them went to his banglow but were caught. They made a clean breast of their mission of killing Mr. Bowering. A trial was held in which S. Tota Singh was sentenced to five years imprisonment while Ganda Singh and Bela Singh received a sentence of three years each. Warrants of arrest in respect of S. Kishan Singh, Mota Singh and four others were issued but they all absconded.

When the arrest warrants in respect of S. Kishan Singh were issued in May 1921, he openly proclaimed that the British government has no morals and scruples. They were expert in deceit and trickery, perpetrates cruelty on hapless persons. No peaceful war can be fought with them. Although SGPC had passed a resolution abstaining all Sikhs from use of force, and if the arrest warrants were out, not to remain in hiding and operate yet present oneself in the court and bear the hardships. These Sikhs refused to obey this order

of SGPC and decided not to fall into the hands of the police. They would continue preaching against the police and the government.

Jathedar Kishan Singh was the resident of village Barhing in District Jalandhar. He was a Havildar Major in a Sikh Battalion. When Martial Law was imposed in the Panjab, and the people were subjected to oppression and tyranny, he started preaching against the Government in the Battalion itself. He was punished and thereafter he resigned from the Army. He was about to be promoted to become a Viceroy Commissioned Officer. Many officers advised him against resignation but instead he started advising them to leave their jobs. At last he was discharged from service and proceeded on pension establishment. But he did not collect his pension throughout his life. In 1920, he joined the Akali *Jathas* and took active part in their agitations. He was so impressive and rhetorical preacher that very soon, he was selected to be the General Secretary of the Shiromani Akali Dal. Jathedar Kishan Singh used to say that he is a peaceful Akali till his arrest warrants are issued. Whenever Akalis assembled he would also be present there. He would take out his sword, address the gathering to be prepared for struggle and then disappear. When even after issue of arrest warrants, he could not be caught by the police, and he did not like the attitude of Shiromani Akali Dal and SGPC officials, he started working on new tracks and programmes.

In June 1921, S. Kishan Singh consulted some of his selected friends and sympathisers in *Malwa* and resolved to face the rulers with weapons. What was the meaning of being peaceful with the enemies, he asked. Our Gurus had also made peaceful sacrifices initially. It had effect on the

people while the enemy was moved least. And therefore they had to take the sword in their hands.

He drew a sketch of armed rebellion in his mind and on *Nimani* fair at Mastooana in Jind state, he made his first speech on the subject. When he started quoting from *Zafarnama* and explained their meanings that in the event of failure of all peaceful means, raising of arms to quell the oppressor was well in order and a righteous act, he was stopped by the President of the *Diwan* to speak further. Therefore, he returned to *Doaba*.

In October 1921, S. Kishan Singh met Sant Kartar Singh Pragpuri in village Hardaspur in Tehsil Phagwara. He was explained the whole programme. S. Kishan Singh preached about Akali Dal in that gathering. A clerk named Babu Santa Singh of a Sikh Battalion expressed his agreement with his views and disclosed before him his resolve to leave the service. But Kishan Singh said that he should not leave the service but propagate and spread rebellion in the army. When the time would be ripe, he could have his name deleted from the roll of the army. Such a propaganda had a positive outcome. In November 1921, a Conference was held in village Rurhka Kalaan in Jalandhar district where the future propaganda and preaching was given a concrete shape. A new organisation named *Chakarvarty Jatha* was planned to be raised.

Rebellious Propaganda

After this meeting of November 1921, the newly formed *Chakarvarty Jatha* brought about a flood of preaching in the *Doaba* region. Their method of spreading their views was very active. They would preach in a village for about three

to four hours and head for another village. After preaching there, they would head for a third village where they would rest for the night, spread their views the next day and escape to the fourth village. All these preachers and propagandists were followed by the police right on their heels. The warrants of arrest in respect of all of them had been issued but following the instructions of their *Jatha*, they would never come into the hands of the police force. As a matter of fact, the police was also not too serious about catching them because the Babbars had openly declared that if anyone approaches them with the aim of arresting them he would rather be brave and courageous and not hope to see the face of his wife and children again. The members of the *Chakarvati Jatha* toured the Doon area first where neither Congress nor Akalis had reached till then. When the people heard the views, more than five thousand members got enrolled in Akali Dal and Congress. This impressed the leaders of Congress and Akali Dal and they stopped opposing the *Chakarvartis*. They fully realised that not getting arrested and working by remaining outside was many times better than getting into the jail and rotting there.

The rebellious propaganda in the villages by the Babbar had commenced. The meetings of the Babbars were now thronged by the people contrary to those meetings which were organised by the parties and groups who preached the philosophy of peace, non-violence and co-existence. The feelings of hate towards the rulers started increasing day by day amongst the people. In order to stop the increasing propaganda, the first step that the government took was to issue arrest warrants of those who were leading the hate Britishers campaign.

The British government was much disturbed at these activities of the *Chakarvartis*. They now started issuing arrest warrants of other activists beside the leaders. The government thought that the release of warrants will cow them down but the reaction was quite opposite. These preacher now became far more active and started holding meetings more frequently. The people's sympathy was also with them. The police force deployed many spy to find their whereabouts. The village headmen were asked to reach minute to minute news to the Police Stations. The residents of the villages where meetings were held and those who served them meals were now harrassed by the police.

The rulers started putting pressure on the police while the headmen of the villages, the pensioners and other sychophants of the government were formed into groups to quell the influence of the Babbar's propaganda. These groups would hold congregations in the villages and import the following type of sermons to the people.

“Our government has turned India into a heaven. They have established post offices, hospitals, schools colleges and provided us with the services of motor cars, buses and trains. They have controlled all thefts and dacoities and have established a reign of peace and prosperity. Carry gold on your palm and no one will look at you. The courts dispose off cases most judiciously. A few unwise and foolish people are roaming about in the villages who are propagating that they will bring the rule of the *Khalsa* and bring their own form of prosperity. They preach pillaging the houses of the rich and killing the gentlemen. They loot

the travellers and snatch the food from the women who carry it to the fields for their father, brothers or husband. These Englishmen are Sikhs who wear cap. They have the blessings of the Gurus : That is why their root are in the nether regions. Therefore do not come into the talk of the Babbars and spoil the peace of the land. Instead report about them to the government and earn an honourable name for yourselves”.

All this talk had no effect on the people. They knew that these sychophants and enemy of the nation consider remaining subservient to the Britishers as state of peace in the country. Very soon these peace assemblies started remaining vacant and unattended. To attract the audience, they now started organising the dance shows of the nautch girls, mimics and other people performing acrobats. They would even distribute sweets in these gatherings. People would now assemble to see the free shows of entertainment, collect sweets and disperse.

Once the organisers had collected people from twenty villages at Dhanowali. S. Kishan Singh and three of his companions got on to the stage from behind. One of the companion took out the sword and the other got his gun in ready position. When the lecture ended, S. Kishan Singh challenged the sychophants to come and arrest him. They got into their motor car and went away. Thus the *Chakarvartis* used these peace gatherings for their own propaganda. The people also became so fearless that they stopped going even when called by the police. When the police harassed them they would say that the members of the *Jatha* come and eat meals by force and on the threat of the weapons.

On 13th January 1922, members of this Jatha took over the management of the Gurudwaras at Kiratpur and Anandpur. Much preaching was done in various villages of Jalandhar during 1922. Two major assemblies were held in January and February 1922.

In the beginning of March 1922 a big gathering was held at Khurdpur during which the Congress preached peace and use of spinning wheel (*Charkha*) for preparing their own cloth. The *Chakarvarti* leaders also reached here and asked for a few minutes to address the gathering. When the time was given, the leader of the *Jatha* said, “These people who have just spoken belong to *Bania* party (Traders Community). They are beating the drum of peace. God knows which well are they going to push the people into. The British government is perpetrating cruelty and oppression and they are talking about peace. They are going to reduce our country to dust. O people ! leave them alone now, give up cowardice, take to arms and be prepared to throw out the British government by force.”

The President of the assembly was S. Lachhman Singh of Bengal. He was trembling when the *Jathedar* was speaking. At last he stopped Kishan Singh and ended the meeting.

During the *Hola Mohalla* at Anandpur in March 1922, S. Kishan Singh and his companions made rhetorical propaganda. When he painted a frightening picture of the cruelties of the British government before the people, they had their goose bumps standing. By quoting freely from *Gurbânî* and relating with the Sikh history, he established it in the hearts of the people that fighting such oppression

and tyranny was the actual duty of a Sikh. When the police tried to encircle the stage, *Jathedar* unsheathed his sword and said, **“The police intend to arrest me but I hope it will not result in the fable of rats belling the cat. Whosoever wants to catch me, he should come prepared.”** The people replied that they would not let police come anywhere near him. Many people from the assembly got up and encircled the policemen. The police then backed out and dare not pursue him any further.

But the government was not casual about the whole development. They encouraged their sychophants and increased the patrolling of the policemen. On 19th March, 1922, the *Jathedars* assembled and discussed that the sychophants have become serious threat who inform the police and disturb their assemblies also. They also threaten the people and boss over them. Therefore they should be stopped some how. If they are not punished, they will become more courageous and the aim and operation of the *Jathas* will be impeded. So all such people should be cautioned and if they do not abstain from their activities, their nose and ears should be cut off. Thus some effort was made to reform them, but without much success. In April 1922, when the companions of S. Kishan Singh were reaching around Jalandhar Cantt, they learnt that the police of *Khajurla* village was beating up a Sikh for keeping a sword and wearing black turban. Three members of the *Jatha* entered the police station with swords unsheathed. Seeing them there turned the faces of policemen pale and they started apologising. The members of the *Jatha* told them to bow at the feet of the Sikhs and seek forgiveness. The policemen did like-wise and saved their lives.

The task of this *Chakarvarty Jatha* was very big but their means were limited. They were much opposed by the government right from the beginning. For procurement of arms. they met soldiers and even prepared the students. They undertook the task of collecting money. On 3rd July 1922, they snatched 575 rupees from the headman of village Bichhorhi who was going to deposit the revenue in the treasury. They explained to him that to harm the foreign rulers was their religion, and they had no enmity with him. This amount was used for the purchase of arms and ammunition. They also purchased a cyclostyling meachine for bringing out a confidential newspaper.

In January 1922, Sant Kartar Singh, a leader of the *Jatha* was arrested by the police. He turned approver and agreed to help the government. Master Mota Singh was also arrested during this month when he was going out for his morning ablutions. Thus the movement suffered a set back right in the beginning.

In August 1922, all the leaders of the *Jatha* assembled and formed a working committee in the presence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. They held elections and commenced a newspaper named ‘Babbar Akali Doaba’. The name of the *Jatha* was also changed to Babbar Akali Jatha. The members of the *Jatha* adopted Babbar as their surname and it became famous. The confidential newspaper would have passionate and bold articles. Some posters were also printed which were pasted on the doors of the sychophants, warning/advising them to give up paths contrary to theirs lest they are pushed to bear their wrath. The newspaper had essays and poems those would incite the sentiments of the people. It was supposed to be printed at ‘Safari Press’. This

name was later changed to 'Udaroo Press' because alongwith the missionaries, the press was always on the move. During the last week of August, the agitation of Guru Ka Bagh commenced where peaceful band of Akalis were beaten up mercilessly. This agitation remained active till the month of September. Jathedar Kishan Singh wrote a special letter to Shiromani Committee in this connection. He wrote that :

“Why are you forcing the people to make unnecessary sacrifices and are offering them for breaking their bones? If you are desirous of complete freedom of Gurudawaras and the country, you will have to raise the sword to achieve it. If you adopt this path, I can reach Amritsar with hundreds of *Jathas*.

The Secretary of the Shiromani Committee sent the letter back through the messenger who had brought it and asked him to convey to the Jathedar Sahib not to send such letters to them.

Pressure of the Government

The government by now was fully warned. Babbars caused much problems for it. There was a peaceful agitation on one side while on the other hand, there was provocative preachings of the Babbars. The administration made complete arrangements for sorting out both agitations. Due to ill treatment of Akalis in Guru Ka Bagh agitation, the government image suffered much. As a result, the beating of the agitators stopped after about twenty days but the arrests continued till mid November. Now they concentrated their efforts more on Babbars. The C.I.D. intensified their activities. The high officials of the police department

became restless. The powers of the special police were enhanced. When the arrests of Guru Ka Bagh agitators stopped in November, rewards were proclaimed for arresting the Babbar Akali activists and leaders. The reward on the arrest of the *Jathedar* was fixed at rupees two thousand. For the Editor, this sum was rupees one thousand while for others, the reward fixed was rupees five hundred only. These wall bills were pasted in every village and those providing shelter to the Babbars were now harassed.

It now became difficult for Babbars to operate. Where common citizens were in agreement with the activities of the Babbar, they faced much danger from the sychophants, government officials and white coloured people. On 25th December 1922, the Babbars held a meeting and decided to exterminate a few selected psychophants because they were not responding to the requests and warnings given by them. They were proving dangerous for the movement. Even common man was much peeved at the conduct of these sychophants. If they cannot succeed in catching Babbars or helping the authorities to catch, they were naming a common person as Babbar instead who was arrested and put in jail. Through some more meetings, the Babbars prepared a code of conduct for their members, which is as under :

1. It will be decided by the working committee which sychophant should be exterminated and when. No one should act according to his own whims and fancies.
2. If one comes across a sychophant, it is necessary to finish him considering the opportunity and time.
3. Nothing of a sychophant shall be removed without

the permission of the working committee. If any money is recovered from such a person, it should be reached to the working committee without pillfering so that the amount can be used for purchase of arms. These funds can be used for meeting the expeditures of "Babbar Akali Doaba" newspaper and common needs of the Babbars.

4. During the process of action, the children of these sychophants will not be touched. No woman or lady should be disrespected or dishonoured.
5. He alone can be the member of the Babbar *Jatha* who when ordered undertakes the task forsaking all other duties.
6. The erstwhile order of cutting the nose, ears of the sychophants is hereby withdrawn because such actions take much time and the victims remain alive. Those who had done the actions can be identified by them. These actions can also create hatred amongst the people in certain quarters. All sychophants will be killed in future.
7. Every murder will be assigned to the names of two or three Babbars and this information will be published in the newspaper of the Babbars.
8. Robbing the notorious money lenders, minions and the property of the rulers is very much in order. Except these, touching of assets of others will be considered a crime. Whatever money is received like this, it will be credited into the common fund of the *Jatha*. No one will use it for his personal benefits.

The above code of conduct was adhered to strictly. Whosoever tried to be smart or acted against the interests of the *Jatha*, was expelled out of the Babbar Akali *Jatha*.

The Rise of the Movement.

With the dawn of 1923, the confrontation between Babbars and the Police force came to the fore. Two Babbars were deceived by their friends for the greed of money who helped the police to arrest them. Sant Kartar Singh another Babbar made a vain attempt to have some other Babbars arrested. On 10th February, a minion named Bishan Singh Zaildar was killed. He was an informer of the police. He would even deceive those Akalis who were living peacefully. Whenever he saw a Singh wearing black turban and long drawers (Kachhehra), he would feel enraged. He would inform the police and cause beating up of the poor person. He would often pick up quarrel with such Akalis and cause their turbans to come off their heads. Intoxicated with the authority and power, he used to say that he would cause the death of Babbars by the collusion of their own heads. On 13th February one more fawning person of similar traits was done to death.

With the death of Zaildar Bishan Singh and his likes, the British officials started feeling and sensing their failure. It caused their sleep to vanish. They started raising walls around their houses and fix steel doors in them. The village houses never had provision of lavatory within the complex. The sychophants were scared to such an extent that all of them made arrangements of lavatories within their houses. They dare not come out side. They refused to be present in the courts on the days of their hearings. Thus the works

of the courts were adversely impeded. These minions were issued with arms licences. The patrolling by the Police was also intensified. With all these safety and security measures adopted, the sychophants were still petrified of the Babbar Akalis. They were disturbed by the Babbars in their dreams. They would often wake up wailing or crying.

When Zaildar Ram Narain Singh Mahalpuria learnt that the Babbars were out to settle score with him, he started fainting. He had very scary nights. The fear of Babbars had caused so much distress to him that he was reduced to a skeleton in a few days. One night when he was lying down, he started shouting, **“Babbars have come ! help me O friends! save me O folks! O God they have killed me, they have cut me to pieces.”** The members of the family rushed to comfort him but he had died by then.

Waryam Singh Dhugga and some of his associates were indulging in thefts and dacoity till the beginning of 1923. But after hearing the preachings of the Babbars and reading their newspaper, it hurt them deeply and they much appreciated the programme of the Babbars. So they met S. Kishan Singh and Babu Santa Singh on 16th February 1923. Both of them did some counselling to them and after much cajoling, they decided to join the Babbars. They were taught the rules and regulations of the Babbars. They would have to recite the five *bânîs* daily. No action will be indulged in to take personal revenge. No female will be dishonoured—they were told. They expressed the willingness to abide by the code of conduct. So they joined the *Jatha*.

By these contributions of the *Jatha*, people were much pleased. Firstly they reformed the dacoits and put them on

to the right track. Secondly, they asked the liquor contracts or sale of liquor to stop. They warned the people not to accept liquor contracts. If anyone does, he would be taken to task by them. Thirdly—no one should take contract of the mango trees existing on the road side. The government is making money in vain. The travellers may enjoy the mangoes that may drop from the trees. So no one entered into contract for the sale of liquor and mangoes during 1922 and 1923. So the people enjoyed mangoes to their fill and never touched liquor.

The police intensified their patrolling. They were too scared themselves. Seeing the Babbars, they would turn their faces but never confront them. The officers were more worried, because they would never be able to come across any lead on murders or evidence. How would the police react? So police started harassing common people. Even on small leads, they would start beating up the common man.

On 3rd March 1923, four Babbars attacked Jamsheer railway station during the middle of the night. People had many complaints against the Station Master and a cleaner employee. They used to abuse Babbars also. Babbars took possession of the government funds and made the station staff apologise and received assurances from them that they will behave themselves in future. Similarly they reformed Boota, *Nambardar* of Nangal Shâmâ. This gentleman would rush to the police as soon as he received some information about the Babbars.

A wrestling competition was to be held on 19th March at Dansiwal. Babbars thought many minions will come to Dansiwal. So they decided to reform/settle the issues with

them and reached there. After the whole days search, they spotted Labh Singh, an artisan who was actually a sepoy of the CID. He was going with his son. A bullet from the gun of Dhanna Singh ended his life there and then. His eight years old son saw everything from very close quarter and became numb. Dhanna Singh said, **“Son! your father was a traitor. So he has been given this punishment. Take this as a lesson and be righteous when you grow up and wash away the blemish of your father.”**

Not finding any witness of this murder, the police started harassing the common people. So on 22nd March Babbars decided to own the killing. All killings done so far or would be done in future were attributed to three Babbars. These were : (1) Karam Singh Editor, Daulatpur, (2) Dhanna Singh, Behbalpur and (3) Udai Singh of Ramgarh Jhungian. These three decided that they will never be caught alive by the police. Their names will be printed in Babbar proclamation. Whenever some one is reformed or exterminated, it will be done in accordance with the instructions of the *Jatha*. They wrote an open letter to the Governor Panjab the same day. They informed him that his stern and oppressive attitude had forced them to lift the sword against the administration and punish the guilty. This letter of Babbar's was a challenge to the government. Police raided number of places and searched them thoroughly. The police arrested Amar Singh, a *Granthi* of Kot Fatoohi. They obtained many leads from him and raided various places on 20, 21, 22 April. They arrested 15 Babbars. During March-April, Babbars settled the score with two more minions and made a clean breast of it. To suppress the movement, the government enrolled some fresh staff. Many special officers were appointed

beside declaring some new rewards. It was promised that every person who helps catch a murderer Babbar will be rewarded with six acres of land. All this did not provide much success to the government. On the contrary, many new problems came up for the government. For instance there were communal riots between Hindus and Muslims in Panjab during April. The Akali workers staked their lives to protect the hapless victims. The government machinery had become ineffective more or less. All the jails were full with the volunteers of Guru Ka Bagh agitation. Though the government had no fear from their side, yet the expenditures of upkeep of the jails had soared. Thirdly, the Babbars had commenced a movement of extermination of the sychophants of the government. It was generally felt by the people that the British rule was a guest of few days. The country will achieve freedom through Babbars shortly.

The Devious Policy of the Government. The government tackled the problem deviously. They impressed upon the main Akali leaders through their loyalists that the Shiromani Committee should issue a statement against the Babbars and also disassociate themselves from them despite the fact that in *Doaba*, the government had made no distinction between the Babbars and the Akalis. The government succeeded in its mission when they declared that only Babbars were responsible for all the murders of their loyalists in *Doaba*. So on 24th April, the Shiromani Committee issued a long statement which said that : **The ideal and peaceful method of agitation that the Sikhs have displayed during the Guru Ka Bagh movement has convinced the Committee that no seed of oppression or tyranny can be sown in the minds of awakened**

Sikhs. Some serious persons may have thought of treading on the path of tyranny after seeing the oppression on a few of their brethern. If such true and honest people have indulged in such acts after their patience had run out, the Shiromani Committee sympathises with them. It also makes a humble request to its brothers gone astray to adopt patience and peaceful methods which is the tradition of the *Khalsa*.”

Thereafter on 27th April, the government ordered the release of Akalis who were arrested in the Guru Ka Bagh agitation. The leaders of the Shiromani Committee made public declarations that the policy of tyranny adopted by the Babbars was not in order. The Sikhs were not keen to establish any kingdom/rule in the Panjab etc. In whatever context these statements may have been made, it helped the government much and they succeeded in suppressing the Babbar movement.

On 15th May, 1923, Mr. Kishan Kaul, the Commissioner of Jalandhar Division was replaced with Mr. Townsend. A contingent of 200 horsemen and 250 infantry soldiers alongwith an aeroplane was placed at his disposal. The new Commissioner started touring the disturbed areas from July onward. He used aeroplane to locate the Babbars in the mountainous areas. The police enticed Kartar Singh and turned him into an approver and an informer. They managed to collect much information about the arrested Babbars. Those arrested were treated very cruelly. Their palms were crushed under the foot of the cot when many policemen would sit on it, the hair from sensitive parts of the body were plucked, red-hot chillies were inserted in their anus, their nails were pricked with needles, hanging upside down and

beating their buttocks were some of the many forms of cruelties that were inflicted upon the Babbars in prison. Many of them gave out no information and bore the cruelty with courage and bravery. They were not only beaten but offered many lurements. Many policemen used other devious means to extract confidential information from the Babbars. The police succeeded in their mission to some extent. A third poster declaring the reward was released in August. The reward money was enhanced. Some more names were added. About 15 Babbars were arrested in August-September through the information supplied by the informers.

Betrayal by the Companions. Uncle of Anup Singh lured Anup Singh with favours and drew out a plan to have some other Babbars arrested. They succeeded in their mission on 31st August. Karam Singh Editor, Udai Singh Ramgarh, Bishan Singh Mangat, Mohinder Singh Pandori, Ganga Singh and Anup Singh reached village Babeli in Kapurthala state where they rested in the house of Shiv Singh as guided by Anup Singh. On the pretext of illness of his aunt, Anup Singh left the place and informed the police about the presence of Babbars in village Babeli. When everyone had gone to sleep, Anup Singh put oil in all the bombs. He made moving parts of some guns unserviceable and removed the bag of cartridges. A contingent of 2000 soldiers and policemen under the command of Mr. Smith encircled the complete village next morning. When the Babbars got up in the morning, they found themselves in a siege. They realised that these officials had come on total information provided to them and Anup Singh was the cause of this betrayal. They decided

to do away with Anup Singh first but he had already surrendered to the police.

The Episode at Babeli. S. Karam Singh made an *Ardâs* and let out a war cry (Jaikara). They fired a shot and came out of the village. They did this to save damage and lose to the villages. Karam Singh and his associates had realised that their weapons had become useless then, so they could only fight with sword. The Babbars escaped through the wing of the village where the army had taken position. Infact a Sikh Havildar of the army had ordered his soldiers to remain calm. The Babbars headed towards the village where a British officer was resting under a mulberry tree. He lost his composure and mental faculties and started shouting *Mâr Dîyâ, Mâr Dîyâ*. His soldiers were right by his side in no time. Mr Smith rushed there and asked Babbars to lay down their weapons. The Babbars pulled out their sword and by coming into a fighting stance, answered the command of Mr. Smith. The body of soldiers withdrew. He then challenged them that he will have them arrested alive before 12 O'clock. The Babbars replied, **“What good was talking to you who have brought a posse of 2000 soldiers to arrest just four men? We will not be caught by you alive.”** The Babbars now proceeded towards Gurudwara of Seventh *Patishahi*. Fighting, they advanced towards it. A drain flowing in front of the Gurudwara was in the occupation of Risaldar Fateh Khan. The Babbars jumped into the water to go across. Mr. Smith ordered the firing to commence since they were difficult to be caught alive, lest they escape to Gurudawara from where it will not be possible to get them out. The swimming Babbars came under volley of fire. Both Udai Singh and Mohinder Singh

were hit by many gunshots. Dharm Singh was injured badly. He fired at Risaldar Fateh Khan who escaped unhurt. The soldiers now let loose their fire killing Karam Singh. Bishan Singh Mangat managed to crawl towards Gurudwara in wounded state. He became unconscious due to excess lose of blood. He was searched by horsemen and when spotted, he let out a *jaikârâ* (war cry) and attacked a rider with his sword. It hit the soldier on his thigh and he fell down. The other horsemen fired at Bishan Singh killing him there and then.

After the martyrdom of these three Babbar leader, Shiv Singh and three others were also arrested for helping the Babbars. It had very significant effect in the whole area. The police faced much ignominy for not arresting the Babbars alive. Infact they suffered much. This episode took place on 1st September 1923. The traitor Anup Singh became a witness and approver of the State. He caused much damage to the movement. In June-July 1936, three Babbars killed him and settled the old account of the deceit and disloyalty done to the Babbars.

Unique Feat of S. Dhanna Singh. Juala Singh and Bela Singh were two brothers of village Jian of district Hoshiarpur. They were very clever. Outwardly, they were the sympathisers of the Babbars, but were in collusion with the police. On 24th October 1923, S. Dhanna Singh Behbalpur came to their house on some errand. Juala Singh welcomed him and hid him in a sugarcane field. He went to Mahalpur Police Station and informed Mr. Horton, the Superintendent. A plan to capture S. Dhanna Singh at 12 O' clock at night through village Mananhan was formulated. Then Juala Singh came back to S. Dhanna Singh and kept him engaged

in conversation the whole night. On 25th October they came to Karam Singh in village Mananhan. Even there, Dhanna Singh was not permitted to sleep so that he does not remain awake at night. Mr. Horton encircled the *Haveli* next night with the help of 30 soldiers. Juala Singh had already picked up Dhanna Singh's weapons and deposited with the police. Ten soldiers went inside. Six of them pounced upon Dhanna Singh and got hold of him. Two sepoys were holding his each arm. One caught him by his hair. When Babbar woke up, he was badly entrapped. He could not move an inch.

Lanterns were lit. Dhanna Singh was handcuffed behind his back. Each chain was held by three sepoys. His legs were also fettered. Mr Horton and Mr. Jenkins also came closer now.

Mr. Horton mocked at him and said, "Dhanna Singh! you said that no one can catch Babbar alive. How are you now? You won, yet you have been arrested."

Dhanna Singh saw Mr. Horton with blazing eyes. Mr. Horton felt as if a fiery arrow was coming at him. He got aside and ordered his sepoys to shut his eyes.

A havildar started searching for a handkerchief to blindfold him. Babbar was very angry within because he had resolved not to be caught alive. He felt helpless that day against those he was determined to free his country from. They were dominating him and dancing around him. He knew that he had a bomb in his side pocket but could do nothing to activate it. Movement on any side was not possible and once searched, he would be bereft of that bomb in no time.

When the Havildar brought a handkerchief, Dhanna Singh mocked at Horton. "**Are you not ashamed. What sort of superintendent are you that you cannot even look at me straight. You cannot even tie a fold on my eyes. And if I was free you would have died of fright long ago.**"

To save himself from any further insult Horton took hold of the handkerchief from the Havildar and proceeded to blindfold Dhanna Singh. The Babbar was beside himself with rage. His blood started boiling. He felt a surge of strength within him. He jerked his arms violently. Those who were tugging at his arms fell away from him. Babbar hit his elbow on the bomb with much force. One of his side blew into shreds. A Havildar, a Dafedar, three sepoys and a buffalo who were in the near vicinity died due to the explosion. Horton, Jenkins, Gulzar Singh Thanedar and a policeman were seriously wounded. The Thanedar and the policeman died on reaching Mahalpur. Horton died in the hospital while Jenkin died at Kolkata while going to Europe.

Dhanna Singh kept his vow with the sacrifice of his life. He lived with the glory of Babbars and died with their grandeur. Such acts of bravery are hard to come by. At least the history of struggle for freedom in India does not present any such example. Dhanna Singh took a toll of eight-nine enemies even at the time of his death and glorified the name of Babbars.

The Historic Episode of Munder. After the death of S. Dhanna Singh the movement became weak. Many Babbars had still not been caught by the police. They took the burden of the movement upon their shoulders. A man

named Jagat Singh of village Munder was a sympathiser of the Babbars. On arrest of Babu Santa Singh, Jagat Singh was arrested by police who succeeded in converting him into a police informer. When he came out of the jail, he started re-associating himself with the Babbars. On 12th December 1923, S. Waryam Singh Dhuggâ, Banta Singh Dhâmîâ, Juâlâ Singh Fatehpur reached the house of Jagat Singh in the morning. Jagat Singh served them meals and made them beds to rest upon. He himself sent the information to the Police Station. A contingent of soldiers under the command of General Fitz also reached from Jalandhar Cantt. The Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police also reached there. They cordoned the village and started vacating it. The Deputy Commissioner asked Jagat Singh about the weapons of the Babbars. He replied that the Babbars do not neglect their weapons any more. However he disclosed the type of weapons that they were carrying. So the police started tightening the cordon. When the Babbar saw the village having been encircled, they decided to stand ground till evening and should attempt to escape in the hours of darkness. The Babbars left the house of Jagat Singh and occupied the first floor of his neighbour Beant Singh, a mason. From there, they could see the village around. When they reached their new vantage point, they proclaimed their war cry and let out a bullet towards the Deputy Commissioner Mr. Jacob. The D. C. and other officers hit the ground to save themselves. In reply they too fired towards the Babbars but to no effect. The DC now shouted, "O Babbars ! drop your weapons and do not confront us. I shall try to pardon your life." The Babbars asked D.C. to come in front and fight. Two machine guns were deployed, yet the Babbars kept firing at the

police intermittently. At 4-30 in the evening, the D.C. ordered to set fire to the house. A sub Inspector and three policemen approached the house under the cover of a wall, sprinkled petrol and set it on fire. Since the doors and windows were close, Babbars did not know about this action of the police. When the fire raged and the Babbars felt the heat, they came out. It was becoming dark. Banta Singh and Juâlâ Singh ran through the door but were brought down by the machine gun fire. S. Waryam Singh Dhugga jumped out of the rear window on to the roof of the neighbouring house, and then into the bylane where some policemen were on guard. Waryam Singh fired hitting one policemen while the others sat there immobile. He kept firing in all directions and escaped in the din and chaos.

Arrests of the Babbars. The police now intensified the arrests of the Babbars who were still operating. During November, December and January, all Babbars were arrested. Perhaps eight to ten were still at large. Some had moved out of the *Doaba*. Of the leading person, Waryam Singh Dhugga had left *Doaba* and was now staying in Lyallpur — Thikriwala. The arrested Babbars were subjected to untold tortures and cruelties. By 4th April, 1924, 91 arrested Babbars were produced before the session. Their trial started on 2nd June 1924 in the court of Mr. J.K. Tap.

Martyrdom of S. Waryam Singh Dhugga. Sadly, those with whom S. Waryam Singh Dhugga was staying in the *Bar* area, turned informer. As it is, he was carrying a reward on his head. On the morning of 8th June 1924, he was wandering in the fields that he saw the police approaching. He ran towards the house where his gun was. He closed the door as soon as he entered and fired a shot towards

the police. The sepoys hit the ground to save themselves. Mr. Degail, the superintendent ordered them to advance but they received a rain of bullets from Waryam Singh. The police was advancing towards the house stealthily. Fearing that the police might set fire to the house as was done in Munder, he hit upon a plan. As soon as he saw Mr. Degail was in front of the door, he opened it. Flabbergasted, Degail tried to run but Waryam Singh asked him to stop and let go a bullet. Mr. Degail became ineffective but S. Waryam Singh received a volley of gun shots from all around that riddled his body and he collapsed there and then.

The feats of bravery of laying down their lives and not surrendering to the authorities became famous in the region. Both Police and army could not help feeling impressed. Some remaining Babbars went far away from *Doaba*, in order to escape the wrath of the police. They returned after 8-10 years to eliminate some selected tyrants.

The Trial of Babbars. Before the commencement of their trial on 2nd June 1924, the Babbars were asked to take services of lawyers but nine Babbars refused to seek any help. Jathedar Kishan Singh declared that he had no faith on the rulers, and these courts were only deceits, treachry and exhibitions. He said that they were unable to take part in that drama since it would prove meaningless. The final verdict was a foregone conclusion and it would not be anything else than what the rulers want. The judge assured that he will do justice and so they must hire a lawyer. The Babbars refused. However the judge ruled that the lawyer hired for other 76 Babbars will represent those who could not afford the services of an advocate, as well

as these nine.

The trial proceeded for a long period. Three Babbars died in jail when the trial was still in progress. 22 of them became approvers on condition of pardon. One of them remained silent and disclosed nothing before the judge. The other 21 made statements in the court.

When the judge asked S. Kishan Singh about the accusations levied against him, he said that he will give a statement in writings instead of oral. The judge refused but Jathedar Kishan Singh insisted. His statement in brief is as under :

“The arrest of S. Ajit Singh, demolition of the wall of Gurudwara Rakab Ganj, the episode at Budge Budge port, Roulet Act, the bloody massacre of Jalianwala Bagh and Martial Law filled my mind with hatred for the British regime. I proceeded on pension in March 1921 and became a Akali, then became its secretary in April 1921. My arrest warrants were released soon after we raised *Chakarvarty* group. I made nearly 357 speeches at different places. The government has done countless oppressions in the Panjab. Much torture has been perpetrated in jails and many innocents have been thrown into prisons. People have been pressurised to make false evidential statements. Karam Singh Daulatpur had followed the footsteps of his elder Sikhs in eliminating the minions and sychophants. Sikh history reveals that reform is a must. It is a matter of shameful death for those who have turned approvers for selfish gains fearing repression.....”

Judgement. The judgement was announced on 28th February 1928. 5 Babbars were awarded hanging sentence, 11 were imprisoned for life, 38 were sentenced to imprisonments ranging from 4 years to 11 years. 34 were released. Many pressurised Jathedar Kishan Singh to appeal in the High Court. An appeal was made. The new judgement passed death sentence to 6; 38 were sentenced to imprisonment ranging from 2 months to 7 years, 10 were given sentence of *Kalepani* while 34 were set free.

Death to Six Babbars. On 27th February 1926, Jathedar Kishan Singh and his companions were to be hanged. On the penultimate evening, he made the following speech :

“We are fortunate that we are going to be standing in the ranks of many patriots who kissed the gallows in the liberation of mother land. Our enemy also must be feeling happy but the real happiness is to us because we are fulfilling the vow as well as duty. This is eternal success for us. The happiness of our enemy is temporary only. He thinks he can now plunder our country with impunity by removing us from their path. This is his misconception. The drops of martyrs’ blood are seeds of revolution those will destroy the tyranny and oppression from the world for ever. The day is not far when this power will uproot the British rule from the soil of India for ever. The blood of the martyrs is making the revolutionary force more powerful. Thank God that we have received the boon of becoming a small part of this mighty force.

This rule has become so weak that it has been rendered ineffective in a particular region by the activities of the Babbars. When such *Jathas* rise at every place, what will be the state of this empire?

Our last wish is that our country should become free during the times of the living Babbars. We are confident that it will be so.”

As the day dawned, the Babbars recited the *Path* in tune with each other. The time kept drawing near. The Superintendent, incharge Police Station, Doctor, *Nambardar* and jail police came and stood in front of the cells. The Babbars were brought out and they proceeded to the hanging site in a procession, shouting slogan, as if they were going on a campaign. Their faces were radiant, their necks were held high. The jail staff had their eyes downcast. The other members of the Babbars were responding to the *Jaikaras* of their companions. There was a chaos in the jail.

At last six Babbars stood on the hanging planks as if the bridegrooms were getting themselves photographed. The *Jathedar* made a short and impressive speech that brought tears into the eyes of the Superintendent. He said, “The judge has made a blunder by sentencing such a brilliant person to death.” The Jathedar smiled and said, “The tears in your eyes indicate that your mind too has realised the ignominy of slavery. Our faces are radiant because the lamp of freedom is burning in our hearts.”

The planks collapsed—six brave persons were hanging in the air.

The Babbars accepted their sentences with equanimity.

But this did not end the Babbar movement. In 1933, some hot blooded Babbars restarted avenging the harm done to their movement by the traitors. In May 1933, they terminated Bela Singh. In June 1936, they did away with Anup Singh. Karam Singh who was responsible for the death of S. Dhanna Singh was also killed in March 1940. Mr. B.T. Superintendent responsible for the beating of Akalis participating in Guru Ka Bagh was also killed by five Babbars. Udham Singh of village Sunam took directions from Babbar–Babu Santa Singh and killed Michal O’Dwyer on 17th March 1940 in India House, London. These two Babbars also had to face hanging sentences that they accepted without a frown on their forehead.

The Aim and Programme of Babbar Akali Movement.

Babbars extended cooperation to the Akali Movement in their efforts to free the Sikh shrines from the holds of characterless, unrighteous, rogues *Udasi Sadhus*. They adopted peaceful policy for achieving religious freedom. The oppressions and cruelty perpetrated by the rulers on the Sikhs was a challenge to them and therefore they resolved to sort out the tyrants. Their aim was to prepare 500 revolutionaries in the Panjab in order to topple the government. The Gurudawaras will become free automatically. To achieve their objectives, the Babbars started collecting weapons and formulated a programme to preach against the government amongst the army personnel and the farmers.

The judge writes on page 5 on his verdict :

“A concerted movement was commenced by making fiery speeches and reading/publishing revolutionary

articles. At the same time, they wanted to start such a commotion that would petrify government employees and other sympathisers. It was aimed to render the suppressing efforts of the government machinery non effective.”

Achievements. The movement acted as a fence for the Gurudawara Reform Movement that had adopted a peaceful policy. The peaceful Akalis were second priority for the government. The government had no fear/danger from them. They were more concerned about the Babbar Akalis. The government granted freedom to the Gurudawaras lest the peaceful Akali also go the Babbar Akalis way. So they kept extending concessions to the Akalis–The rulers could sense the pulse as was evident from the speech of Mr. Krek, Chief Secretary, that he made before the council in March 1923 and was published in the Tribune.

“I know that the leaders of Gurudawara Movement had preached adoption of peaceful methods. I praise them for having said everything clearly and without ambiguity. They filled the minds of their followers with the principle of peace by their own example and effective propaganda.”

Those sychophants, village headmen and police informers who often opposed Akalis left it for the fear of Babbars. Otherwise why should he worry who has the support of the rulers at their back?

Failures. The Babbar Akali Movement ended abruptly and could not succeed in achieving its objectives. The causes of the failure needs to be studied because the path adopted by the brave Babbars was very much traditional

as is evident from their following statement :

“We hold Lord Reading and Sir Malcolm Hailey responsible for our present state. We do not want to appeal. Why should we when we have not committed any crime or sin. We did what Guru Hargobind Sahib and Guru Gobind Singh Ji did. Don’t waste your time in fruitless appeals but put us on the gallows soon. If you hang us without wasting any more time, we shall be thankful to you because we have to reach the country of our beloved Lord. It is better to leave this false world as soon as possible.”

With emotions like these, the failure of mission can only be attributed to paucity of unity in the *Panth*. *Panth* could not draft out one policy and opinion. The government exploited the differences that existed amongst the Akali leaders. The leaders failed to unite and draft out a concrete and cogent plan of action. Instead they started opposing and criticizing each other that has not ended even today.

The organisation of Babbars was also rather weak. Experience of members were very less. The new enterants were immature and took the movement to the lower levels. Many became approvers. For a revolutionary movement, the preparation had to be good and complete. Half hearted attempts are always dangerous.

The superemacy of the Babbars was even acknowledged by the government. The magistrate was much impressed by the 100 page statement of Jathedar Kishan Singh. His speech before his hanging had the superintendent in tears. Who commented adversely on the verdict of the judge. A

handful of Babbars had put the British government on the rearfoot and had frightened them no end. It had shaken their determination of conquering the world—much of which had been achieved already. Babbars had challenged their enemy without caring for their might. They revived the glory of Sikhism and also re-confirmed their existence.

