

Bībī Balbīr Kaur

90 years ago, Sikhs had no control of the gurduārās (ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ). India was under the rule of the British and many of the people who took care of the gurduārās were also under the influence of the British. They would not follow Sikhī the way the Gurūs asked them to. The Sikhs who believed in being good citizens of the Khālsā decided to regain control of the institutions so in order to ensure that Gurū Sāhib's teaching remain correct. This was called the Akālī Movement or the Gurduārā Freedom Movement.

The Sikhs wanted to make sure independence for their gurduārās. This scared the British who noticed that the Sikhs were fighting for the freedom of their gurduārās as well as the freedom of India. They sensed a potential threat to their control from this small community of lions. Expectedly, the British directed their terror machinery against the Sikhs. Along with Akālīs (ਅਕਾਲੀ), their sympathizers also troubled the British Psyche. As a result, the British forces began arresting and confining all Akālī sympathizers in the jails.

During this time there was a ruler of Nabha, Ripudaman Singh, who believed in and supported the Gurū Khālsā Panth. He visited Harimandir Sāhib at Amritsar and consulted with leaders. The British didn't like this about Ripudaman Singh. They took control of Ripudaman's area, Nabha, and expelled him from the region.

The Sikhs got very upset at this and the whole Sikh Nation decided to fight against this injustice. In order express their anger at this injustice, they began doing Akhand Pāṭh at different places. Sikhs initiated an Akhand Pāṭh (ਅਖੰਡ ਪਾਠ) of Gurū Granth Sāhib at the Jaito gurduārā as a way to express their outrage against this injustice. Unfortunately, it was not allowed to be completed. The agents of the British Empire, operating under British instructions, dragged and arrested the Granthī Sāhib who was reciting the Pāṭh. As a result, the Akhand Pāṭh was forcibly interrupted. Now the Sikhs were even more angered because their freedom to practice was taken away.

They decided to conduct a non-violent morcā (ਮੋਰਚਾ / march) for the resumption and completion of the interrupted Pāṭh. Thousands of Gursikhs, Singhs, Kaurs, children, and elders started flocking to Amritsar ready to shed their lives for this freedom struggle. They were all eager to reach Jaito. However, the Akālī committee decided to send a Jathā (ਜਥਾ) of 500 Gursikhs. The remaining Gursikhs were asked to await the schedule for the next Jathā. Everyone was eager to proceed to Jaito, yet they had to accept their Jathedār's decision.

Under the echoes of Jakārā (ਜਕਾਰਾ), "Jo Bole So Nihal, Sati Sri Akāl," (ਜੋ ਬੋਲੇ ਸੋ ਨਿਹਾਲ, ਸਤਿ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅਕਾਲ) this particular Jathā left Amritsar after having sought the Hukam from Srī Akāl Takht and pledging to remain non-violent. Thousands of supporters were present on this occasion.

The non-violent march of this Jathā was a unique event for the whole world. Organized in rows of four, these saint-soldiers proceeded bare-foot from Amritsar while reciting

“Satināmu Vāhigurū”. Soon they reached their first rest-stop. The local saṅgat (ਸੰਗਤ) at the rest-stop conducted the seva of helping the Jathā like preparing and giving them laṅgar (ਲੰਗਰ).

It became evident from the first rest-stop that the services of the females who had accompanied the Jathā for organizing laṅgar, were not needed. The Jathā pleaded that since the local saṅgat could help with laṅgar, the women were not needed any further. The Jathedār (ਜਥੇਦਾਰ) asked them to return. Many did. However, several wanted to continue with their brave brothers and they did not return. Our Balbīr Kaur was among this group. When Jathedār asked her to return, her eyes were filled with tears. She said, "Brother! Do not stop me from serving the living martyrs of Gurū Gobind Singh. Sevā (ਸੇਵਾ) is the only essence of this life. Beside we never know when death will come upon us. I plead for permission to continue for Guru's sake. Let me proceed." Jathedār could not break her heart. He reluctantly gave permission, especially when faced with the utter display of self-sacrifice.

Balbīr Kaur was 22 years young and accompanied by her one year old son. The playful happy face of this child was not only Balbīr Kaur's joy but the source of amusement for the whole Jathā. He played with everyone in the Jathā along the way.

The journey was coming to the end. The Jathā prepared to depart from its final rest-stop. Jathedār stood on a high spot and pleaded for the return of the accompanying congregation. British forces had dug-in with machine guns, information the Jathā had acquired previously. The Jathedār announced, "With Gurū's blessing, a martyr's melā is being organized. However, only those Gursikhs who have Srī Akāl Takhat's Hukam should proceed further. Others should return and await their turn."

The congregation stopped and let the Jathā proceed. However, not everyone obeyed the Jathedār's instructions. Bībī Balbīr Kaur continued marching with her brothers while she carried her son along.

When Jathedār learned of Balbīr Kaur's continued march with the Jathā, he left his leading position and caught up with her. "Bībī, there is potential of firing ahead. You should not continue any further." Jathedār pleaded, "My Brother! Do not stop me. My thirst for sevā has not been quenched yet. Allow me to enjoy this sevā. You tell me of the dangers from the potential firing ahead? Five hundred more are with me. Since they are continuing for sure death why shouldn't they be accompanied by a sister? I too have accepted the Gurū's Amrit. I shall consider myself blessed if I too could accept martyrdom along with my brothers. Here my quest has not been quenched by serving my community." Balbīr Kaur again pleaded with tears in her eyes.

"But..." The Jathedār was about to say something when he was interrupted by Balbīr Kaur saying, "My child, this is what you wanted to point out. He too is Gurū's blessing. If he too serves the Panth, what greater deeds could be beyond this?" Saying this, Balbīr Kaur again hugged her child who burst out laughing.

Jathedār pressured Balbīr Kaur to return. Others pressured her too, but she did not budge from her decision to continue her march to death with her brothers. She insisted that the non-inclusion of a female along with 500 males in the pending martyrdom would be an insult to the brave daughters of Tenth Gurū. "How could the Gurū, whose amrit turned women into warriors, who bestowed equality to women, tolerate that not even a single daughter participate in his holy war? This is sacrilege that Balbīr Kaur simply cannot allow."

The power of her persuasive arguments forced her brothers to accept her position. Even the Jathedār had to bow against her spirit of sacrifice and courage.

The Jathedār, having been forced to accept her decision, returned to his lead position in the march. Guru Khālsā's Kesrī (ਕੇਸਰੀ) flag was freely fluttering in the winds. The Jathā exhibited a unique presence while the accompanying band's performance portrayed innocence. Under the guidance of their deeply held faith in Gurū Granth Sāhib and the command of their Jathedār, the brave force of saint-soldiers marched toward the Jaito Gurduārā. They were chanting "Satināmu Vāhigurū." Every Gursikh in the Jathā was projecting calmness.

Hindu, Muslims, and Sikhs welcomed the Jathā all along of the way from Amritsar to Jaito, because of their participation in this religious task. They were served with abundant amounts milk, khīr (ਖੀਰ, milk and rice pudding) and other things. Flowers were showered upon these living martyrs along the way. Thousands of rupees were donated.

Now it was turn for people serving the British to extend their welcome. Rather than sweets, however, the morcā was welcomed with rifle and gun fire. The Sikhs were showered with a rain of bullets. The group of Sikhs, however, were prepared for such a welcome. They accepted this welcome as hukam and continued the sweet walk towards their goal without any interruptions... If someone's face was colored with blood, someone else's head, chest, or thigh was colored. Many Singhs fell to the ground but would rise immediately to continue their march. The bullets would hit their chest only to fall again. With courage they would either rise again or accept death. It was the same serving that Balbīr Kaur had insisted to reach and accept. Let us focus our attention on her condition. She continued her march while hugging to her child. She loved the rain of bullets that she had eagerly awaited. By now her face was glowing with some unique brightness.

Suddenly, she was hit by a bullet in her forehead. A blood spring burst open. Her whole face was covered with blood, eyes were covered with blood. However, this did not affect her march. She continued with the chanting of the Divine Name.

Suddenly another bullet hit Balbīr Kaur's child. The bullet pierced the child through his ear and then hit Balbīr Kaur's chest. The child died immediately. Balbīr Kaur kissed his forehead and placed his body on a nearby platform saying "Vāhigurū look after your amānat (ਅਮਾਨਤ / temporarily entrusted to me for safe custody)." However, she did not stop. She had no strength left to continue. Her walk was wobbly by now, yet her heart's quest had not been quenched. Chanting the name of "Vāhigurū," she kept her pace with others...

Then she got hit by another bullet and died too. With this bullet, her beautiful body fell to the ground. But not her soul! Her deepest quest was finally fulfilled. Her blood-covered face still exhibited peace and dancing valor as Balbīr Kaur breathed her last.

Adapted from: Daughters of the Khālsā, translated by Baldev Singh from "Ādarshak Singhapīānī" (ਆਦਰਸ਼ਕ ਸਿੰਘਣੀਆਂ) by Karam Singh